KAREN TWELVES

IMPROV FOR GAMERS

SECOND EDITION

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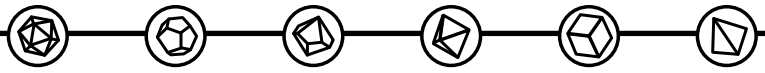

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IMPROV FOR GAMERS

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Thanks to everyone at Evil Hat for the opportunity to turn a complicated collection of lesson plans into something anyone can pick up and play.

And thank you, Sean Nittner, for everything, but most of all for responding to my idea of "I should design an improv workshop for gamers" with "Yes!"

FORWARD

This book falls right in the center of many overlapping aspects of my life: gaming, improv, and teaching. I don't think it would have happened without experience in all three.

I loved roleplaying from my first roll of the dice in an AD&D game in high school. I could create whole worlds and play out situations I could never experience in real life. It's also through gaming that I've made so many amazing friends.

Improv has helped me with my confidence, my problem-solving, and how I approach day-to-day life in general. Improv introduced me to some of my very best friends. From my first improv class, I realized how much improv could improve my roleplaying skills. I could create more vibrant characters, take more narrative risks, and encourage more collaboration at the table.

As an ESL teacher, I was largely responsible for creating my own lesson plans and heavily supplementing the course curriculum. Having been disappointed by one too many substitute teachers who went off-book (who spends 4 hours debating public vs. private healthcare with intermediate-level ESL students??), I kept meticulous notes and detailed instructions for each and every lesson.

When I first started teaching Improv for Gamers as a workshop, I approached it the same way—extremely detailed notes, scripted introductions for each exercise, and lots and lots of marginalia about how long everything should take. I did the same for the improv classes I taught, either extensively reviewing the existing curriculum or making my own.

Sometimes, after an Improv for Gamers workshop, people would ask if they could get a copy of my notes, so they could pass these exercises on to their friends.

I was reluctant to share it at first—not because the content was proprietary, but because these notes were written for me and my co-facilitators in the context of teaching a full workshop. I wasn't sure how well others could parse it all.

But eventually, I made a shareable digital copy for people who asked. I don't know if anyone ever tried to use it.

After teaching the workshop for a few years and being asked more and more for a copy of the exercises, I finally decided to pitch it as a book.

A fourth area of experience that has greatly influenced this journey is my career as a technical editor and a games editor. In both roles, I help authors make their instructions make sense, and especially for gaming, also be fun to read. But I'd never been on the other side of the writer-editor relationship before, so even though I was confident that my draft would have very few typos, I wasn't sure how I'd fare as a writer.

I revised a few things here and there and handed the first draft over to my editor Josh Yearsley, who came back and wisely said, "This is written for an improv instructor. Who is your actual audience?"

I mean, it's right in the title. It's for gamers. I should have known that.

So I wrote the whole thing over again from the perspective of teaching gamers who are likely new to improv how to learn improv and also how to teach improv to other gamers who are likely new to improv.

And that worked a lot better.

I kept teaching the workshops, and teaching other improv classes, and taking classes myself, in order to keep practicing and learning. I knew that even though eventually I would have to call the book "done," the workshops would keep evolving.

As I was promoting it, I already saw the book's flaws. I had written it for gamers but always imagined it in a workshop environment: in person and lasting at least an hour or two. I hadn't considered that a GM might want to run through an exercise at the top of a session that would tie into their game. I hadn't assessed how the exercises would work for online play. And although I had adapted exercises on the fly for various accessibility needs, I hadn't addressed that at all in the book.

And I knew that the book would be stronger if it showcased other dual-class improv-gamers (there's a lot of us out there!) to add other perspectives and experiences than just my own.

So I already wanted to make a second edition as soon as the first one was sent to print.

My goal is that this edition doesn't just offer more exercises, but more of everything. More ideas, more tips, and even more encouragement to make the exercises within work for you in whatever way it needs to.

I'm very grateful that *Improv for Gamers* has had the opportunity to grow and evolve as much as the worlds of improv and gaming have.

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WHAT THIS BOOK IS

Improv for Gamers started out as a one-day improv workshop at EndGame, a hobby store in Oakland, California. The goal was to share improv with our local gaming community to show how many of the skills used by improvisers are directly transferable to tabletop gaming.

We selected exercises specifically for gamers to practice how to encourage creativity in their gaming groups, create dynamic characters, and collaborate effectively and enthusiastically—practical applications of improv's "Yes, and" tenet to our favorite hobby. Many of these exercises originated from great improvisers such as Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, or were picked up from colleagues and coaches over the years. In many cases, we adapted them to better suit the purposes of the workshop.

Propelled by the success of this initial workshop, we started running it at local gaming conventions. Soon after, we added Improv for GMs (game masters), highlighting how to direct scenes, share the spotlight, and balance setting versus narrative.

It wasn't long until we developed Improv for Larpers (live-action roleplayers), which explored shifting between high and low status, developing relationships, and acting without physical props.

But these workshops don't just apply to story games and larps. They'll give you the tools for solid teamwork necessary to develop any engaging and effective story, be it about the complicated lives of teenage monsters or a lucrative dungeon crawl.

We've had a blast running these workshops at conventions and friendly local game stores, and now we get to share some of our favorite exercises with you! We hope you will try out some of them with your friends. Viola Spolin said, "We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything." We hope that with this book, you can put theory into practice. And as Patricia Ryan Madson put it, "An excellent manual on swimming is useless until you jump into the pool."

So jump in, and enjoy!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We've picked our favorite exercises from our workshops and grouped them into categories of general skills. Each chapter starts with low-pressure games and progresses into exercises that may be more challenging. If you'd like to lead your group through a few exercises (or even run your own workshop!), here are some suggestions for how to put it all together.

Select a few exercises that interest you. Depending on your focus—whether it's general roleplaying or something more specific to GM or larping skills—you may find some sections more relevant to your interests. Here's what you can find in each chapter:

WARMERS has some quick and easy exercises that involve silly sounds, big physical movements, word association, and other fun stuff to activate your creativity.

YES, AND explores the number-one rule of improv—listen to your partner, and add your ideas to theirs—as practiced through collective storytelling.

CHARACTERS is all about using one small starting point to build a multifaceted character. You'll play around with different mannerisms, ways of speaking, facial expressions, and emotions to make the basic archetypes your own.

RELATIONSHIPS connects all those interesting characters together—who are you to each other, and how does that influence your actions?

STATUS explores the ebb and flow of power, within one character or among many. Have some fun revealing secrets and playing to lose!

SPACE OBJECTS looks at the invisible objects that you might pretend to interact with in a scene. You'll practice creating imaginary objects that have believable weight, dimensions, and details.

TIMING focuses on knowing when and how to end a scene. There are exercises for directing scenes by consensus or individually, and for rapidly shifting the spotlight between protagonists.

SCENEWORK has a variety of exercises to put everything you've learned into practice, in scenes that range from three lines to a few minutes.

To get started, try one from ***Warmers***. These will get you and your group energized and more comfortable with each other. Grab an exercise or two from ***Yes, And*** to get into a collaborative mindset. From there, you can go to whichever skill you'd like to learn more about and try out as many that sound fun to you. Each section starts with exercises that can work as warmers themselves for that specific topic, so you can start small and challenge yourself more as you go. There's no set order for these exercises, though we do recommend saving the more performance-focused exercises—mostly found in ***Timing*** and ***Scenework***—until the end, as a way to bring together everything you've worked on. Many exercises also have suggested expansions or variations if you want to dig into one aspect a bit more.

Check in with your group after each exercise. Ask them: How did it feel? What was challenging, easy, fun, scary? What was something someone else did that was really awesome? What was your favorite moment? Take a minute to share what you're thinking, and how it might relate to your own gaming experience.

Review the glossary and appendices. Starting on page 148, we give a glossary of the improv terms used throughout the book, suggestions for maintaining a safe space, and lists of locations, relationships, and character aspects to help start scenes. There's also a recommended reading list if you want to learn more about improv in gaming, on the stage, and in your daily life, plus recommended games that use many of the improv skills discussed in this book and advice for pulling improvisers into your game!

Take what works for you. There's a time slot for every type of improv—the 7:30 show can indeed be much different from the 10:30 show in both content and maturity level—as well as myriad formats to produce different types of scenes. Improv can be rapid-fire comedy, sometimes framed as a competition between two teams. But improv can also be measured and serious, with improvisers taking their time to build poignant, dramatic scenes. Similarly, there's a vast array of games with which you can tell wildly different stories. This book is not the definitive guide to either improv or gaming. We're not laying down the law for the one true way to game, but we hope that these techniques will enhance the games you like to play.

HOW TO PLAY NICE—AND WELL

Having someone in your group with a little improv experience never hurts, but if you're all new to improv, we welcome and encourage you to try out these exercises on your own. That said, you'll still want someone as a facilitator—and if you're reading this book, that's probably you!

As a facilitator, you're empowered to introduce the exercises, perhaps model an example if needed, and maybe even take some light action where appropriate to give feedback. If someone has gotten off track or misunderstood the point of an exercise, it should be easy to course-correct. As long as you're kind, clear, and quick with the correction, your fellow players will appreciate your guidance!

We put in your hands the power to walk people through these exercises and introduce a few ground rules for the group to uphold:

BE KIND. Improv can seem scary at first. Acknowledge everyone's bravery (and your own!) for trying out something new, and pay attention to how people are feeling.

BE POSITIVE. Applaud each other's choices and be mindful of giving criticism. You're not trying to train to be better actors but to discover ways to improve your gameplay—and have fun doing it.

BE AUTHENTIC. Don't worry about being clever. In fact, *don't try to be funny*. The laughter will come from the unexpected surprises as you explore these exercises, not from forcing jokes. Just have fun with what you're doing and be yourself. If you are playing a character in a scene, allow yourself to have genuine responses to whatever challenges your characters face; let them feel their feelings.

If this sounds a lot like advice that a GM would give to their players, it should! Roleplaying encourages the same excitement to be creative while maintaining respect and trust within the group. We want to create a safe and fun place where people can offer a lot of ideas and then work together to make those ideas even better.

MODIFYING EXERCISES

You can take what works for you (and leave the rest), but you can also *make* it work for you. In this section, we include tips for adapting exercises for accessibility, for online play, and for your specific game.

ACCESSIBLE IMPROV

By Aser and Megan Tolentino

So, you're flipping through *Improv for Gamers*, and you're thinking, "This is great, but what if this exercise doesn't work for someone in my group?" If you find an exercise potentially problematic for someone because it requires visual clues, moving around in a crowd, listening to and repeating phrases, or the like. They're unable to participate, and you've just been handed a terrific opportunity. You get to put those potentially nascent or not-so-nascent game design muscles to use.

In figuring out how to provide equal access to everyone in your group, you'll need to sit down and identify what the key activity in the exercise teaches the participants and how it does that. You can then think of other ways to accomplish the same thing. In exercises where players take turns saying something to contribute, they could write or sign it instead to include a player who is deaf or hard of hearing. Instead of using eye contact or pointing to indicate who should go next, players could identify each other by name or some distinct characteristic so that a blind player will know when it's their turn and to whom they should direct their action. Rather than moving around a space, participants can sit in a circle and describe their actions to one another to avoid mobility challenges or difficulty coping with crowds.

Most importantly, if an exercise isn't going to work with one or more members of your group, feel free to toss it. If the rest of the group wants to try, that's fine too. Just ensure that the person is given another opportunity to shine in the next activity. After all, not all exercises will resonate with everyone, and the important thing is to ensure that all participants feel safe, valued, and welcome to return on their terms.

Improv is all about collaboration, the magic of creating something together. The easier we make it to build things together, the more spectacular our creations will become.

ONLINE IMPROV

By Marcus Sams

2020 video conferencing... am I right?!?!

We've all been in that VC and received the forehead show. It's that moment when you're looking at your screen, and you see the forehead or nasal passages of the person on the other end because they really wanted to talk to your face or forgot where the camera was. Maybe we have even been that offender. No judgment, but seriously. **sudo:** Stop.

Here are some tips that will help you tele-navigate the world of the video conferencing internetz while actually connecting with the person on the other end.

Are you an actor? Have you gotten on-camera training? No? Why not? Because you're a human, just trying to human on the internet. That makes sense. Learning some on-camera techniques will help you human at a higher level. What we're talking about is *connection*.

As an improviser, I like to say we are in the business of letting ideas and concepts land. To do that, we have to make sure we're communicating effectively. When communicating, we generally want to look at the person we're speaking with, so it makes sense that we get so much of the forehead show. Unfortunately, until we get cameras installed into the middle of our screens, our ability to connect may feel hampered. That is until we break up communication into its individual parts.

The first thing to realize is that VCs aren't a fluid form of communication. If they were, there would be no talking over one another, and we would easily be able to sing together. Anyone who has had an online birthday party knows all too well that this is NOT the case. STOP singing.

If we break up the communication process into two parts, it's much easier to own our communication. We're either in "send" mode when speaking or "receive" mode when listening. Look just slightly above your camera to make it feel like you're speaking to the audience. For the person you're speaking with, it looks like you're actually talking to them. When you're in receive mode, simply drop your eyes to your screen to fully take in what is being said. Over time, this becomes more fluid, but like anything, it takes practice.

This simple on-camera technique elevates the video conferencing experience for all in the "room" and allows you to communicate with impact. These skills are invaluable to anyone in sales, the arts, online gaming, improv performance, and yes, even acting. No matter your profession, we are all storytellers. When the medium to communicate changes, to be effective storytellers, we must change with the medium.

CHAT CONNECTION

- **Take a piece of tape, fold it about an inch in length (still leaving some of the sticky part), and stick it to the top of your camera (don't cover your camera!).**
- **Players work in pairs.**
- **Pick a topic to discuss (it needs to be a two-way conversation, not a monologue).**
- **While speaking, look at the tape above your camera to be in SEND mode.**
- **While in RECEIVE mode, drop your eyes and connect to your partner's eyes on the screen. Avoid bobbing your head up and down (unless you dig headbanging).**
- **Practice for 3–5 minutes. The more you practice, the better you'll get, and the more impact you'll have in future conversations.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

You might be asking, "But how can I see my partner when I'm talking to them if I'm not looking at them?" Remember that you have peripheral vision! You can still drop your eyes every now and then.

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR ONLINE PLAY

- If an exercise usually passes turns in a circle, designate the order beforehand. Alternatively, when a player is finished, pass the turn to anyone else by saying that player's name first.
- Take advantage of breakout rooms so players can work in smaller groups.
- Agree on a way to indicate being "onstage" or "offstage." For example, if you're offstage, turn your camera off, or the host can highlight just the active players. Or if you're using speaker view, mute all players not in the scene.
- If you find yourself distracted by seeing yourself on the screen, turn off the option to view yourself!

PERSONALIZED IMPROV

We provide a lot of suggestions in this book to draw inspiration for characters, relationships, and locations (check out *Appendix E*, page 160). But what if you want to make the exercises relevant to your specific PCs? Here are some suggestions of how you can reskin exercises for different personalized contexts. Feel free to play around and adapt the exercises for yourself!

In the context of your setting

"Three Things," "I'm a Tree," and "Tableau" are great ways to world-build and discover more about your game's setting. What are the three values listed on the royal crest? What trios of things can you find in this cyberpunk city? What are all the various items in this apothecary shop? You can pose these questions to your group during session zero or at any point when it would be fun to add a bit more color to the scene.

Space object games like "Comparing Objects" or "Giving a Present" can also help paint the setting by visualizing items with more specificity. And "Yes, Let's!" gives you the opportunity to engage in your setting in new ways as a group.

In the context of your characters

"Hot Seat" (page 76) is already designed for you to use with specific characters. You can just as easily take other character or scenework exercises and use your own PCs. How does an exchange as short as "Been Waiting Long?" play out between two PCs with a whole campaign of history? What does your PC look like when heightened through "Golden Goose?" What types of conversations does your party have when split up in "Coffee Shop"? What happens if you do a montage with your PCs? Oh wait, that's a larp!

If you feel like your PC is stuck in a rut, try shaking things up with a status game, or use "Work/Home/Play" to explore their different relationship dynamics. Or play "Lead with Your Body" with a particular PC in mind to fully embody them.

Also, try playing an in-character round of "Animal Secrets" to explore your PC's vulnerabilities.

In the context of a new game

Use "Yes! Characters," "Classic Cast," or "You Make Me Feel" to create the PCs you'll play that session.

Play around with "Conversation Trio," "What's My Name," or "Lead with Your Body" to discover new characters and non-player characters (NPCs).

It IS the game

Take your PCs and tell a short story about them with "One Word at a Time," "String of Pearls," or "Color and Advance."

Play "Fortunately/Unfortunately" but flip a coin to find out if the next sentence will be good or bad for the character. Oh whoops, you just made a GM-less game!

WARMERS

Even seasoned improvisers wouldn't run onstage without warming up a little first. But we're doing more than just stretching and getting our blood pumping—we're getting in the mood to be creative. We want to push past that anxiety of feeling a little silly or the fear of not knowing what to say. We need to shake off that discomfort and, in the words of renowned improviser Keith Johnstone, "step into the fear."

Warmers are a great way to break the ice and establish a welcome playspace to get a little silly as a group. They can also get you back in the zone after taking a break.

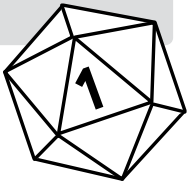
They're often high-energy games that involve explosive sounds, expressive movements, and quick thinking.

These exercises offer a taste of the ideas explored in the later chapters, so there's no need to dive into "lesson mode" with a lengthy critique after each one. However, warmers can be a good opportunity for the facilitator to make some non-judgmental observations while the group warms up together, and they help prevent some of the bad habits that inhibit good teamwork.

Have fun and get warmed up for what's yet to come!

BUT WHAT IF I MESS UP?

Nobody's perfect, and achieving perfection is not at all what improv's about. If you ever flub what you wanted to say, or forget your scene partner's name, or even contradict what someone else just established in the scene, that is simply a hazard of the trade. Shake it off, and jump back in! Your scene partners are here to support you—they may even take that "mistake" you made and turn it into something amazing.



PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

A tip from Liisa Lee

I know some players can feel really intimidated by more fast-thinking, adventurous, improving players at the table, but that's a skill that can be learned, like any other. It just takes practice. As adults, we've all gotten out of the habit of practicing... well, anything. Folks can think it's uncool to practice (it's not), feel it's scary, or feel anxiety and nerves at having to jump in with others at the table.

Using improv games as a warm-up to game sessions is an amazing tool for my games, to help players connect, start coming together as a team, and get on a fun "brain tennis" groove, that can make teamwork in-game indispensable, hilarious, sometimes ingenious, and often unforgettable.

PASS THE MOVEMENT

Have you ever felt like your group wasn't all on the same page? Maybe you declared that your moody teen just came home after a particularly rough day at school, only for the person playing their parent to chime in, "Get up, you'll be late for class!" Now you have to either scramble to justify what just happened—did you fall asleep and miss a day?—or talk out-of-character to get back on track.

Or perhaps you were larping an intense scene where someone shared their character's deepest, darkest secret, and not 10 minutes later you can't even remember their character's name.

When name cards and session notes fail us, we've got to go back to basics and work on listening and paying attention to each other. That's what improv is all about! You can stretch that muscle in this fast and fun game of mirroring physical movements.

- **Player A addresses another person (Player B) and makes a random movement (or just strikes a pose) along with a sound. It can be any pose, any sound, big or small! It's going to feel silly, but since you're all being silly together, why not go big?**
- **Player B addresses someone else (Player C) and mimics Player A. It's inevitable that it will be a little different—in fact, we're counting on it!**
- **Player C turns to Player D and mimics what Player B just did. Be sure that Player C reproduces Player B's offer, not Player A's.**
- **Continue passing the sound and movement through the group until you return to Player A, who ends the round by mimicking what their original offer has morphed into. If it's a small group, you can go around a few more times before starting a new round, with someone else starting the group off with a new sound and movement.**

EXPANSION!

You can modify later rounds by having Player A start very small, with each person making it progressively louder and bigger, ending with Player A cranking it up to 11. Conversely, Player A can start big, and the group incrementally dials it down.

✦ TIPS! ✦

You're not trying to play a perfect game of telephone with the first player's offer, but to pay attention to the person passing to you. This also keeps you from planning too much, so you can stay focused and in the moment.

Stick with sounds and movements that everyone will feel comfortable with, physically and emotionally. This means no gymnastics, and also no lewd gestures. The former could end up getting someone hurt, and the latter is only fun for someone who wants to make others feel uncomfortable—and now the group trusts them just a little bit less. See ground rule number one on page 4: Be kind. Don't put people in unsafe positions.

You can also modify the sound/movement combination by just sounds or just movements, depending on what's easiest for everyone in the group.

OFFERS

In improv, most everything your scene partner tells you is an **offer**. Offers might establish the setting, who you are to each other, where the scene could go, or something as simple as their character's name. Your scene partner is giving you the gift of information, and to refuse that gift isn't just rude, it stops the story from moving forward. That's a **dropped offer**. Sometimes it's accidental—names get forgotten all the time! But engaging in active listening will reduce these mishaps.

Keith Johnstone further expanded the terminology with **controlling offers** (when you give specific information) and **open offers** (when you leave it open for your partner to define). You can practice the differences between the two in "Giving a Present" (page 112).

SOUND BALL

This exercise is similar to "Pass the Movement" (page 12) in that you're paying a lot of attention to and mirroring your partner. It's a little silly, but this wild game of catch is a great way to bond with other players.

For this exercise, you'll need to keep focused on the action because it could be your turn at any time. Just as it's not cool to tune out and check your phone at the game table, it's not cool to stop paying attention to your scene partners.

- **Player A throws an invisible ball at someone (Player B) while making a random, silly sound. Be in the moment—the game can stall out if you pause to think of the "perfect" sound. It's much more fun to not know what you're going to say until you say it!**
- **Player B repeats the sound as they mime catching the ball. It probably won't sound exactly the same—what's important is that you're paying attention to your partner, and acknowledging their offer by repeating it as best you can.**
- **Player B throws the ball and a new sound to someone else.**
- **Continue until everyone has thrown and caught the ball at least twice—don't leave anyone out!**

EXPANSION!

If you're just getting to know each other, try "Name Ball," in which you say the name of the person you're throwing the ball to. As they catch it and repeat their name, they can take this opportunity to correct any unintentional mispronunciation. It's also a great way to learn everyone's names! You can also use names before throwing the ball to help identify who's catching it.

You can also try "Word Association Ball," in which Player A says a random word instead of a sound. Player B catches the invisible ball and repeats the word, and then throws a different word, which they associate with Player A's offer. You could also play a lightning round of this as a lead-in for "Convergence" (page 24).

✦ TIPS! ✦

Eye contact can feel awkward for many, but it's important in improv. It's not only a way to connect more deeply with your scene partner—it's practical, too! Your partner won't know for sure if you're throwing the ball to them if you're not making eye contact. Be sure to hold their gaze while you're winding up your sound ball.

THROWING SWORDS

Which is more fun for you: embracing the glorious death of your character, or being the villain who brought about another character's untimely end? If you said the former, or the latter, or both, you're right! Not everyone enjoys character death, and not everyone wants to play the villain. But a good scene partner is always ready to jump in and be the character that the scene calls for.

A tenet of improv that is often repeated is "make your partner look good." We want to support our scene partners and their choices, so in this exercise you'll get to experience being both halves of an epic death scene.

- **Everyone gathers in a wide circle.**
- **Player A throws an invisible sword across the circle to another person (Player B).**
- **Player B catches the invisible sword and holds it above their head, giving a triumphant battle cry.**
- **The players on either side of Player B (Players C and D) give their own battle cries and slice Player B across the torso with their own invisible swords.**
- **Player B gives an anguished yell and in their final moment—don't drag out your death, keep the energy high!—throws their sword to someone else across the circle (Player E).**
- **Player E catches the sword, and the pattern continues.**
- **Continue throwing the sword around until everybody has played both roles at least once.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Just as with "Sound Ball" (page 14), eye contact is helpful and being in the moment is key to this exercise. You never know when the sword might come your way, or when you might need to cut down the person next to you. Make eye contact to confirm the throw, and stay alert to where the swords are flying!

You can also use people's names to let them know you're throwing them the sword.

THREE THINGS

How long does it take you to come up with a character's name? Or to describe what's in a room? (GMs, this is always that one room that you hadn't fleshed out in your notes, but of course, the one that the players decide to explore first.) Taking 10 minutes to scour name lists may lead to analysis paralysis, and stumbling to come up with ideas off the top of your head in front of your friends might feel awkward.

An improv mindset encourages us to push past any anxiety and be comfortable with spontaneous creativity—and supporting our fellow players to do the same. In this exercise, you'll limber up your creativity by saying whatever comes to mind and creating a positive environment for collaborative brainstorming.

- **Player A addresses another player (Player B) and asks them to name three things to fit a specific category. (Such as "What are three things you would wear on your head?" or "What are three things that are blue?" or "What are three things in your fridge?")**
- **Player B lists three things to fit that category, as quickly as possible. ("A top hat! A bird nest! A fancy wig!")**
- **Everyone shouts, "Three things!" and mimes beating a drum with their fists.**
- **Player B asks Player C for three things in a different category.**
- **Continue until everyone has asked and answered at least once.**

WHY THE HAND GESTURES?

They help punctuate the intensity of saying "Three things!" and gives everyone a bit of physical engagement, since you're not moving around much in this exercise. Also, it's fun! For a few other exercises with silly synchronized gestures, check out "Yes! Character Building" (page 38), "Animal Secrets" (page 96), and "Classic Cast" (page 88).

EXPANSION!

Try "Character Three Things." As a group, start by brainstorming basic characters (cheerleader, spy, athlete, doctor, vampire) or just different emotions (shy, sad, bubbly, strict). Then play a round of "Three Things," but Player A asks their question in the style of a specific character. ("Ready? Okay! What are three ways to cheer on a friend before the big game?") Player B mimics that character when giving their response. Then Player B assumes a new character and gives Player C a category, and so on. You can also try asking and answering as your actual characters in a current game.

As always, be careful with accents when portraying different groups of people; they can be difficult to master and easily slide into hurtful stereotypes. For some practice creating different character voices that aren't accents, see "Conversation Trio" on page 70.

Also, you can play "Things Three!" which works backward: Player A gives Player B three random objects, and Player B comes up with a category for them.

DARE TO BE DULL

Sometimes your offer may be so utterly bizarre that you didn't even know you were going to say it until it came out of your mouth. That's magical. But it can be equally satisfying when someone makes the obvious choice. As Keith Johnstone says, "dare to be dull." We're not in a competition to be the wackiest, and what seems obvious to you may be delightfully absurd to someone else.

Don't focus too hard on finding the "most interesting" idea. Remember the group agreement from page 4 to be positive—your fellow players are already prepared to meet your ideas with enthusiasm.

I'VE GOT YOUR BACK

Before a show, improvisers often engage in a group ritual. It could be a chant, taking a deep breath together, or some other way to feel grounded and connected to your fellow players. It's important to let the others in your troupe know that you're going to get out there and make them look good—improv is a team effort, not a group of individuals vying for the spotlight. Sometimes we even take a moment to connect with each person individually, pat them on the shoulder, and say, "I've got your back."

It's important to remember that everyone at a game is there to build a story together, and as such, we need to be ready to give enthusiastic support. This game gets us warmed up to this idea by letting each other know that we're listening to them and we've got their back.

- **Players spread out into a large circle.**
- **Player A approaches Player B and asks for three items (they can be specific things or general concepts, related or unrelated). ("Hey, I need a comfy chair, a good book, and 6 hours of free time.")**
- **Player B repeats back the three items and lets Player A know that they've got their back. ("Comfy chair, a good book, free time. No problem! Let me get that for you.")**
- **Player A takes Player B's spot, and Player B approaches Player C. They use the last item of Player A's list to be the first item of their list. ("Can you help me out? I need 6 hours of free time, a train ticket, and hope.")**
- **Continue the thread of players asking each other for help and swapping spots in the group.**
- **After a few turns, the facilitator starts up a new thread of people asking for help, while the first thread is still going. This way there are multiple people asking for things at the same time.**
- **Continue adding new threads (up to half the number of players) and enjoy the chaos!**

✦ TIPS! ✦

The later rounds of this exercise may not work for online play unless your application allows for multiple people to speak at the same time without cutting out the audio. In this case, focus on playing as quickly as possible, to tap into the exercise's urgency and excitement.

EXPANSION!

You can add the element of dealing with change and exploring consent by adding another round, similar to the expansion "Spot" (page 29). Give players the option to say that they can't help the other player. They don't need to give a reason; they can just say "No." The player asking should then say "Okay" to acknowledge that they heard them and ask someone else for help getting their three things.

ACTIVELY LISTEN

A tip from Senda Linaugh

The most important thing I can do at a game table is listen—really listen—to what everyone else is saying. Listening helps keep me in the present story moment so that my reactions are honest and not planned. It gives me fodder to reincorporate and creative inspiration to make the most interesting decisions. My favorite gaming experiences, whether facilitating or playing, have all been surprises that the table built together by actively listening to each other.

HEY FRED SCHNEIDER!

Player buy-in can make or break a game. If your GM says, "This is a game about adventures on the high seas," then there's an expectation that everyone's character will have a piratical element. Your mad scientist with a bag of 21st-century gadgets may not fit in.

This is a loud and silly game that practices buy-in by asking players to embody the same character. Specifically, Fred Schneider from the B-52s.

- **Arrange yourselves in a circle, or some other way to determine the order of play.**
- **The group chants the chorus together: "Hey Fred Schneider, what are you doing?" It should follow the rhythm that you might hear in a B-52s song. ("HEY fred SCHNEIder, WHAT ARE you DOing?")**
- **Player A answers the question in their best Fred Schneider voice. ("I'm WALKing down the STREET, and WEARing my HEADphones!" or "HEATing up a MIcroWAVE DINner for ONE!") Following a beat can be challenging, so just do your best and bring lots of energy!**
- **The group repeats the chant, "Hey Fred Schneider, what are you doing?"**
- **Player B gives a different answer about what they're doing.**
- **Continue around until everyone has said what they're doing at least once.**

WHO'S FRED SCHNEIDER?

You know, lead singer of the B-52s? Their song "Love Shack" had that line, "Hop in my Chrysler, it's as big as a whale"? If this song isn't familiar to you and you think not everyone will get the reference, it's okay to skip it and just focus on the rhythm of the game. The point is to have fun, not to demonstrate your knowledge of pop-rock hits from the late 1980s.

Sometimes in scenes, a player will make a reference that you don't recognize. It's okay to ask for clarification. You don't have to know everything to have a good scene, and often your interpretation (or misinterpretation) will become a fun new element!

✦ TIPS! ✦

There's no linear plot telling the story of Fred Schneider here, just random actions.

Also, if someone ever doesn't know what to say, move to the next person in the circle by starting up the chorus again. Remember the group's promise to be kind and the principle to always make your partner look good. Don't leave someone in the spotlight if they need to step back!

EXPANSION!

You can play a non-Fred version by naming different professions. Player A asks the question to Player B, but addresses them as a certain profession. ("Hey there doctor, what are you doing?") Player B responds with an answer typical to that character. ("I'm scrubbing down my hands and prepping for surgery!") Player B then addresses Player C as a different profession. But keep using that fun rhythm when responding!

CONVERGENCE

We often use the term **group mind** in improv to describe when improvisers are so keyed in to the same idea, the scene falls perfectly into place. These are the types of scenes where people ask you after the show, "So, how much of that did you plan in advance?" If you can tap into that state of flow, your creativity will be effortless. (Group mind is also why couples should never be on the same team in *Pictionary*.)

In this exercise, you practice group mind with word association. And as with "Three Things" (page 18), there's no opportunity to pre-script—the exercise pushes for spontaneous creativity.

- **Determine two players (A and B) to start the first round.**
- **Players A and B count to three together, and then shout out a random word simultaneously. (You may need to repeat the words again so everyone hears them.)**
- **Everyone thinks about a word they associate with the two words A and B just gave. For example, if Player A said "tree" and Player B said "crimson," Players B and C might converge with "redwood"! (But try to avoid repeating words that anyone has said already.)**
- **As soon as another player (C) thinks of a word, they can announce "One!"**
- **The next player (D) to think of a word calls out "Two!"**
- **Players C and D count to three together and each shout their new words.**
- **Continue playing until a pair says the same word at the same time!**

✦ TIPS! ✦

You've only got the count of three to say a word, so don't worry about trying to guess what your partner will say; just say whatever makes the most sense to *you*. This is word association, not a logic puzzle. It's also okay if you never have that magic moment of "winning" the game. Playing this game for too long without a match can be really draining; what's more important is connecting with your partner. Celebrate those times you got really, really close to the same word, too.

CHOOSE A CHOICE

You can't achieve group mind if you're stuck in your own head. One of our workshop coaches, Mia Blankensop, has often used the mantra "choose a choice!" Sometimes the fear of making the "wrong" choice holds us back from doing anything at all. If you're deliberating over taking the tunnel on the right or the tunnel on the left in your dungeon crawl, you're not exploring either tunnel, and the game isn't going anywhere. Just choose one!

CRISIS!

When we make offers, we're establishing new truths about the world. And the great thing is that they're true *because we said they're true*.

Let's face it, we may never be as good with computers as our cyberpunk hacker, or as cunning a diplomat as our elven ambassador, or as knowledgeable about HOA regulations as our small-town suburbanite. That's okay! We can *make something up* and keep the story going. We can invent names of high-tech computers, declare that in this country, one should always greet each other with an elaborate handshake, and decide at that moment that all hedges must be trimmed at 90-degree angles.

This exercise practices quick, creative problem-solving while taking advantage of the power of improv to establish bold new truths.

- **Players work in pairs.**
- **Player A shares a problem they have and an unrelated object. ("I missed the bus, and all I have is this orange.")**
- **Player B shares their problem and unrelated object. ("My cat ran away, and all I have is this coat hanger.")**
- **Player A explains how they can solve B's problem with their object. ("Cats love citrus, so we'll slice up the orange and make a trail leading back to your house!")**
- **Player B solves A's problem with their object. ("You can tie some string around the coat hanger to make a grappling hook. Then throw it at the bus so it latches on and pulls you along!")**
- **Switch partners and repeat for a few more rounds.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Both the problem and the object can be completely mundane. The real silliness comes from the solutions. As we showed in the example, you can make up whatever other details you need to make your solution work. It's going to work because you said it would!

GO

GMs and facilitators have many responsibilities in bringing about a rewarding game, and there's one that, if done right, will go entirely unnoticed: monitoring the players. What are all their characters doing? Who hasn't been in the spotlight for a while? Is everyone having fun?

In this exercise, you practice the heightened awareness necessary to tap into the group mind. Each of you will track many moving elements to achieve a seamless whole. Some improv warmers prompt a simmer of focused attention, rather than high energy and high volume, and this is one of them! It's also largely silent, so you rely a lot on eye contact to communicate.

- **Everyone forms a wide circle.**
- **Player A points across the circle to another player (Player B). This action indicates that Player A would like to take Player B's spot.**
- **Player B acknowledges Player A's request by saying "Go."**
- **Player A starts walking slowly across the circle toward Player B.**
- **Player B needs to get out of the way before Player A reaches them. The only way to escape is to take another player's spot, so Player B will point and make eye contact with someone else (Player C).**
- **Player C will say, "Go," and Player B will start their slow walk toward Player C.**
- **When Player B's spot is vacant, Player A can take it.**
- **Play continues until everyone has moved at least once. There will inevitably be a few people moving at the same time, so move slow enough to avoid bumping into each other.**
- **Play a second round, in which players must simply nod instead of saying "Go."**
- **Play a third round, in which players may not point or nod, only make eye contact. Holding this sustained eye contact communicates asking for the spot and granting the spot.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

This exercise increases in difficulty each round, but some people may slide into the silent phase early. Just so everyone's playing by the same rules, make sure it's clear how people can communicate each round. It's also very important to *wait until your partner has given permission* before you start moving towards their spot.

To take away the time pressure of how long it takes for someone to vacate their spot, don't walk directly to your partner. Be circuitious. Take your time. When your partner's space is open, head over to fill it.

EXPANSION!

A variant of this game, "Spot," has a different focus—rather than practicing awareness and eye contact, you focus on listening and consent.

- Player A points to Player B and asks, "Spot?"
- Player B gives permission to Player A to take their spot by responding "Yes."
- Player A says "Thank you" and moves to take Player B's spot.
- Play a second round, in which you have the option of responding either "Yes" or "No."
- If Player B says "No," Player A must say "Okay" and ask someone else for their spot. You might get a few "Nos" in a row, but just keep acknowledging that you heard them say no, and ask someone else.

TELEGRAPHING

A subtle gesture is hard to read; extending your whole arm while pointing, combined with direct eye contact, communicates much more clearly that, yes, you are pointing to your partner. This is a form of **telegraphing**, where you unambiguously communicate your intentions. It can be physical (like a slow-motion punch) or verbal ("I am closing this door on you now, Gerald!").

At the game table, it's easy to switch between in and out of character; in larping, you may use telegraphing to not break character. This technique is a convenient way to communicate vital information, which is opposite of the "show, don't tell" method encourage in acting and writing, and that's okay!

WIKISPEEDIA

As we discussed in "Crisis!" (page 26), we have a lot of creative power in both improv and gaming to establish new truths and speak with authority, even if we're not actually as knowledgeable in a topic as our characters.

This exercise practices creativity with confidence and is a good introduction to the concept of **give and take**. We want you to be confident taking focus when the moment calls for it, but even more comfortable giving focus to others. This way, nobody is fighting for the spotlight. (For more exercises about give and take, check out "Clap Clap, Snap Snap" on page 126 or "Coffee Shop" on page 130.)

- **Designate one player (Player A) to start in the spotlight. If the space allows, players form a loose circle with Player A in the center.**
- **Player A starts speaking on any topic as if they were reading its Wikipedia entry. Don't worry about it being accurate! That's for the Wikipedia editors to check later. ("Cats were first discovered in Nova Scotia by an explorer who wandered into a field of catnip...")**
- **At any point, another player (Player B) can interrupt and take A's place in the spotlight and start talking about a new topic. The inspiration for Player B's topic should come from a recent keyword that Player A said. ("Catnip is a plant that cats of all sizes love, even big cats like lions! But if you go to the zoo, it's illegal to throw catnip at the lions. You can be fined upwards of a million dollars...")**
- **When Player A is interrupted, they return to an empty spot in the circle.**
- **Continue claiming the spotlight and sharing made-up Wikipedia entries until everyone has gone at least twice.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

There are benefits and drawbacks from playing this "hot spot" style, with one player in the center of the circle. A drawback is that the speaker may not know who to address and might spin around a bit as they're speaking. But the benefit is that it's a great way to practice the give and take of the spotlight. When Player B has an idea of what they could talk about, they need to claim the spotlight right away by interrupting Player A. Player A may not expect the edit, so they get to practice yielding the spotlight even if they had more they wanted to say.

Play around with other configurations and see what changes—Player A faces everyone else as if giving a lecture; Player A faces away from everyone else, speaking to an imaginary audience; Player A faces an imaginary audience, with the other players on the sidelines.

For online play, explore features like keeping your camera off unless you're speaking or other ways to indicate who's in the spotlight.

EXPANSION!

Rather than skip around topics, try giving the whole group one topic to explore in depth. Players can interrupt when they find a "mistake" in the Wikipedia entry. They interrupt, correct the fact, and take over speaking on the topic. Set a time limit and encourage everyone to interrupt at least a few times.

!? | YES, AND

So what are improvisers talking about when we say "Yes, and"? It combines two basic ideas: accepting someone else's idea and adding to it.

This doesn't mean you're literally saying "yes" after every offer. When you accept an offer, you're acknowledging that your partner has established a fact about the world. Their offer is a brick that you will use to build a story by cementing it with supporting facts (that's the "and"!). If you drop that offer, you're wasting a valuable resource.

Here's an extreme example of a dropped offer: Your partner starts a scene talking like they're in a 1940s noir film with the line "Never thought someone like you would need to hire a private detective." You respond, "Yeah, I can't believe they're holding our corporate retreat in this cave." You're not just dropping that offer. You're swatting it down and stomping on it. Not only is it off-putting to your scene partner, but your scene can't move forward until you both figure out what's actually happening. Accepting the offer would be saying *anything* that acknowledged that you are in an old-timey decade, they are a detective, and you are a client. The scene can go in a number of directions, but it will always have a steady foundation if you run with the initial offer.

It's also poor form to **negate** an offer by denying that it's true. ("You crashed my car!" "What? No I didn't.") Now you're in an argument scene, or "no-prov." No-prov is really easy for one person (you just deny whatever your partner says!) but not fun for the person who has to work harder to justify how all their partner's negations work in the story.

"Yes, and" is not a binding contract to accept every idea. Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton have this to say: "With Yes, And, you don't have to act on every idea, but you do have to give every idea the chance to be acted on." Some prefer the revised tenet "Consider Yes," which recognizes player agency in a way that "Yes, and" doesn't. You're encouraged to be open to every offer, but you have the authority to turn it down—especially if it crosses a line.

Gaming has even more ways to provide safety nets, such as the X-Card (often used in RPGs) or "Cut and Brake" (a larping tool that we discuss on page 151). Gaming also benefits from not having a live audience—you can pause at any time to check in and make changes to the story. So if you need to turn down an idea, do so. And if another player says they're not comfortable with your offer, listen to their "no" and respect it. (The exercise "Spot" on page 29 can be very helpful for practicing saying no, and being okay hearing no.)

"Yes, and" also doesn't mean your character has to respond positively. There's nothing wrong with your character being angry, so what if you tried being angry while *agreeing* with your partner's offers? The horrible things they're accusing you of? Totally happened. ("You bet I crashed that car, I hated that pile of junk!") The story still moves forward.

Gaming with "Yes, and"

Using "Yes, and" in your game is simple—listen to the other players, thoughtfully consider their ideas, and build on their suggestions. That's it!

In improv, we often **endow** our scene partners, meaning we give an offer that is a specific detail about their name, characteristics, or relationship with our character. ("Hey Bret... wanna go to prom with me?" or "Hey Dad, what's for dinner?" or "You sure you wanna go sky-diving for your fortieth birthday? You're super scared of heights.") Endowing is a convenient way to open a scene with some immediate information. (A good exercise to practice endowment is "Yes, Because" on page 40.)

You can also respond to offers with a justifying endowment. For example, when creating characters for a game, someone might say, "I'm thinking that my spellcaster would be the quiet one, yeah?" You might want to encourage their idea and could respond, "Oh, totally, maybe they always whisper their spells? And my character never hears them so is convinced they're not a real spellcaster."

It feels validating to have your ideas accepted so enthusiastically by your fellow players, and it builds mutual trust and collaboration.

You can also tread more lightly when giving offers by couching it in "What if," or "Do you think it's possible that," to give a clearer opening for the player to either say no or negotiate the scene to fit their comfort

level. (“How would you feel if my character tried to flirt with yours right now?” “That’s perfect, but can they do so really badly?” “Oh totally, this will be a complete disaster.”) Improv is all about being flexible; don’t value a plot point more than the players themselves.

GMing with “Yes, and”

GMs might use “Yes, and” to offer the players the worst possible scenario. If they’re not inclined to accept that, you can go to the dice to decide. (“And then the spirit shoots lightning at you, throwing you across the room. You will break your back on impact. Or would you like to roll to see if you can dodge it?”) Saying the threat aloud, as if it were true, is a powerful storytelling technique, but it’s up to the player (and the dice) to see if this terrible fate comes to pass.

Some more advice: avoid blocking your players! Don’t clutch too tightly to your preplanned scenario. If the players are offering ideas, consider the opportunity presented to you—you can say “yes,” which acknowledges your players and makes them feel more deeply invested in the story they helped create. Always check the temperature of the room and adjust accordingly. What are they most interested in, what do they consider the biggest threat? It may be different from what you had in mind, so follow their lead and respond to how they’re interacting with the setting.

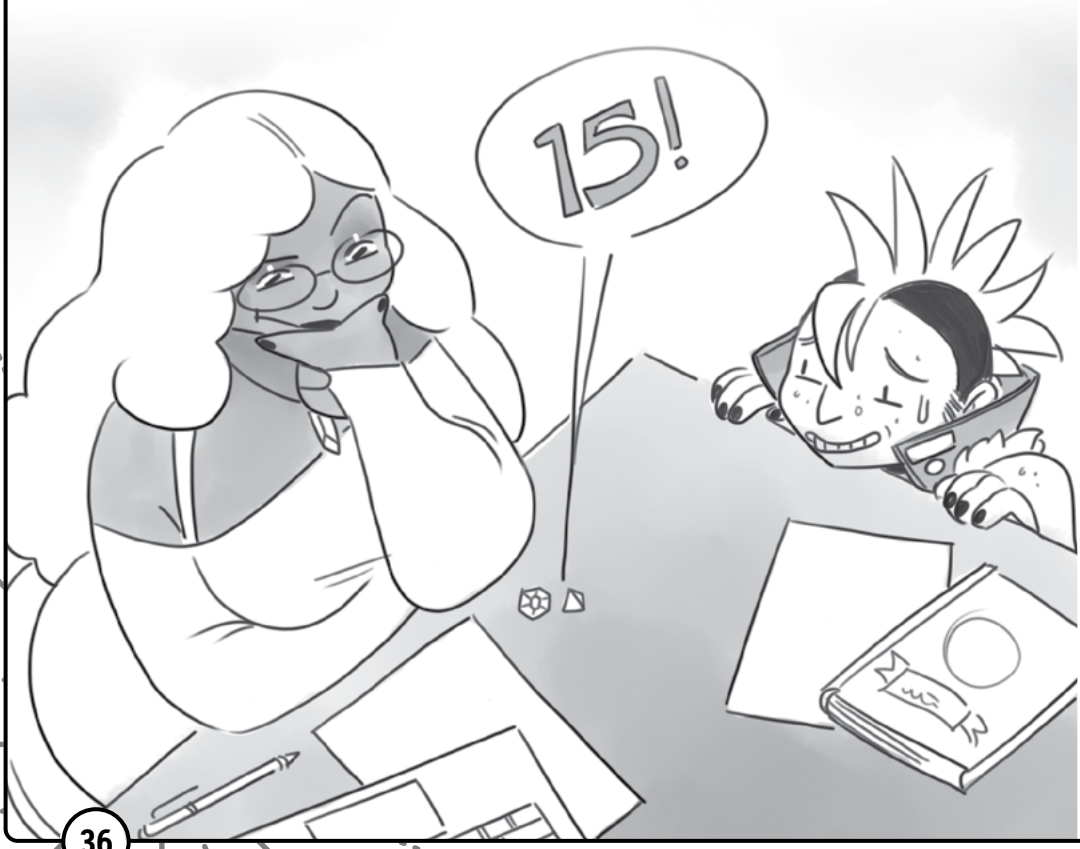
Keith Johnstone says that improvisers block when they want to stay in control. Just as gamers often say that the players are more important than the game, as a GM, it’s important to ask yourself if it’s necessary to maintain an iron grip on the plot. The players will be excited to see their own ideas come to life!

!? THE SLIDING SCALE OF "YES"

Your barbarian fighter swings her great-axe, and... whoops, you needed to meet or beat a 17 but rolled a 2. She misses. Does that 2 say anything else? Is the narrative result of a 2 any different than if you'd rolled a 10?

Your super sleuth has just seconds to crack this safe, but rolls a 5 when they needed a 6. Aren't they supposed to be the best of the best? How do you justify the result "Sorry, nothing happens," on a near miss?

Many games have mechanics for varying degrees of success and complications, but for those that don't, GMs can always employ their own narrative sliding scale to determine the outcome, by building on "Yes, and" as follows.



"Yes, *and*" is the critical success. You may have also heard of it as "succeeding with style," or maybe you earn a "boost" or just a "high degree of success." It's the best possible outcome with a cherry on top. How great is it to find the treasure and it's more than you expected? Not only does your barbarian split her enemy in twain, but she intimidates the remaining foes so much so that they're shaken and flee! Your sleuth might get out without the guards even noticing, or quicker than expected, or be in a good spot for their next move.

"Yes, *but*" is success with some minor complication thrown in. It doesn't negate your success entirely, but it doesn't give your character everything they want. This is a good way to represent those near misses. Your character may have a minor success, but then face just one final, unanticipated obstacle. Or perhaps they succeeded, but a complication will come back to bite them later. Your barbarian crushes her enemies, but one had friends in high places. Maybe the thief cracked the safe, but the documents they needed are locked in a puzzle box.

"No, *but*" is failure with a silver lining. You didn't achieve your goal, but a minor opportunity opens up. Your barbarian swung too wide, but she sees that her enemy's breastplate is cracked—one solid hit would pierce it! Your sleuth has never cracked this type of safe before... but they know who has. The players might have to rethink their strategy, but not all is lost.

"No, *and*" is the critical fail. You don't accomplish your goal, and now you have another complication. This redirection can still move the story forward, though. Your barbarian swings wide and spins around, getting a hard thump on the back of the head. She awakes in the back of a caravan in chains. Your sleuth takes so long with the safe that they have to dash out without avoiding the security cameras—now the authorities will be coming for them and their crew.

Every option is also an opportunity to bring in another character—to assist, or to be the herald of additional fortune or misfortune. And even if the game doesn't call for it, you can always narrate degrees of success to give the value of the die roll more meaning than just "yes" or "no." In fact, the game *Archipelago* by Matthijs Holter bases its resolution mechanic on this sliding scale to determine all outcomes. We recommend some other games that use improv techniques in ***Appendix D: Recommended Games*** (page 156).

YES! CHARACTER BUILDING

You don't have to literally say the word "yes" to "Yes, and" your partner. Or if you do, your character doesn't have to be enthusiastic about it—but you, as players, should be enthusiastic to each other! If your partner's awkward freshman character asks your popular teen to prom, your character might not *want* to go, but says yes so the scene will move forward. The point of interest to develop now is why they agreed and how their reluctance will affect the story.

You may have heard the saying "There's no bad ideas in brainstorming." Using the "Yes, and" mindset promotes a safe space for unbound creativity that can yield amazing results. You can whittle it down to the most tenable ideas later, but in the moment it's a free-for-all.

A prime example of brainstorming in gaming happens right at character creation, when a player may ask for ideas or suggestions. As the group accepts and builds on offers, this takes the pressure off the individual to come up with an intriguing, well-rounded character all on their own.

Let's start with the basics and practice the idea "Yes, and" quite literally—by saying "yes" with gusto.

- **Player A starts creating a character by giving them a name. ("Their name is...")**
- **Everyone enthusiastically responds, "Yes!" and pumps their fists (similar to the movement in "Three Things" on page 18).**
- **Someone else adds another detail about that character. ("He works at..." "Every morning she..." "Their favorite food is...")**
- **Continue adding facts until the group reaches a natural stopping point and concludes that the character is well defined.**
- **Continue playing more rounds as desired.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Resist the urge to start telling a story or introducing secondary characters. Another challenge is avoiding contradictions—you may have had the great idea that Misha loves cats, but someone else just said that she's a dog person. It's okay to let that idea go; what's most important is validating other people's offers and maintaining continuity.

ONE WEIRD THING

A solid guideline when establishing any element of a scene is to stick to just one weird thing, if any. Your character doesn't have to be gonzo to be interesting. Remember the group agreement to be authentic. Being genuine will resonate more than trying to be the most interesting character in the room, and competing weird things can muddy the plot.

!? YES, BECAUSE

When you accept and build on someone's offer, you **justify** why that offer is true. When you drop an offer, you're not only letting your partner know that you weren't listening, but now the onus is on them to salvage the scene by reconciling their offer and your conflicting offer. This is why we avoid negating.

This is another exercise in literally saying "yes," but it adds the "and" by prompting players to justify the offer with supporting facts.

- **Designate one person to be in the spotlight (Player A). Other players can form a wide circle around Player A, if the space allows.**
- **Someone (Player B) approaches Player A and makes an offer, either about the setting ("Sure is hot out"), or about Player A's fictional character ("You've been embezzling from the company!"). The offer can be completely mundane or completely bizarre.**
- **Player A agrees with Player B's line, whatever it is, and justifies why it's true with just a sentence or two. Your answer can be as dull or dramatic as you like, as long as it's a justification. ("Yes, because it's mid-July," or "Yes, because I need to continue building my extensive collection of discontinued canned meat products!")**
- **Player B takes Player A's spot in the spotlight, and someone new (Player C) gives Player B a new offer.**
- **Continue until everyone has given and justified an offer at least once.**

EXPANSION!

If you have a smaller group or want players to have longer turns in the spotlight, everyone could approach Player A with an offer, with the final player taking their place.

HITS

A *hit* is a small idea to start you off. ("My character always wears a red cloak," or "There's an old, broken grandfather clock in the corner.") Your group is there to "Yes, and" your idea so you don't have to do all the work yourself, and they may make a few leaps of deduction to give your offer a deeper meaning. ("Maybe they're covering up a tattoo from a rival cult," or "The clock is stuck at 3:07—exactly the time that the murder occurred!") As Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton advise, "Bring a brick, not a cathedral." Start with a small idea and build it out as a group.

PARTY PLANNING

As we've said already, "Yes, and" isn't just saying the words "Yes, and." It's about listening, acknowledging, and justifying your partner's choices, then adding your own ideas to what's already there.

When improvisers meet to practice, we might run through multiple exercises like the ones in these books to refresh our foundational skills before starting scenework. Improv is a muscle that always needs to be stretched, and even something that seems basic like "Yes, and" is worth practicing over and over again.

We use "Yes, and" in gaming whenever we support someone else's choices and weave them into the larger story. In this exercise, we explore what it's like to practice the "Yes, and" rule wrong first to better illustrate how to do it right.

✦ TIPS! ✦

Check in after each round by asking how it went and discuss what worked or didn't work.

In Round 1, did they successfully plan the party? Why not? How did it feel blocking an offer and having your offer blocked? Consider how even if we all have amazing ideas, we can never move forward if we don't accept any offers.

In Round 2, did they successfully plan the party? How complicated was it? How many ideas were built on the last one? Consider that if all we're doing is saying "Yes, and," we may not always be listening, but just saying the words before moving on with our own ideas. That's not a scene; that's a shopping list.

In Round 3, did you notice anything different? How did it feel justifying an offer and hearing others justify yours? How did taking the time to justify an offer influence the idea you added next? Consider that when we slow down to justify the offer we've been given, we have more opportunities to link it to what's already there and validate our partner by showing them we're listening. We'll still have a grand party, but it will be more cohesive and grounded than just saying "Yes, and."

- **In small groups, the players plan a party. Decide what type of party in advance. The budget is unlimited, so anything is possible!**
- **In each round, players propose ideas and respond to other ideas in a specific way. Each round lasts 2–3 minutes or enough time for everyone to make multiple offers.**

ROUND 1: "No, how about"

- **Player A offers their idea. ("We should have cake at our birthday party.")**
- **Player B blocks the offer and adds their own. They don't need to explain why. ("No, how about we have a decorate-your-own-pie station.")**
- **Players continue to block the previous offer before adding their own.**

ROUND 2: "Yes, and"

- **Player A offers their idea. ("Let's have a DJ play at our beach party.")**
- **Player B agrees and adds their own offer. ("Yes, and we should have nice lounge chairs with umbrellas.")**

ROUND 3: "That's perfect, because"

- **Player A offers their idea. ("I think our wedding should be at a ski lodge.")**
- **Player B justifies the offer and adds their own. ("That's perfect, because it's a winter wedding. Also, we should pass out hot chocolate to all the attendees when they arrive.")**

!? FORTUNATELY/ UNFORTUNATELY

While you made a group agreement to be positive and to treat each other well as players, that's not necessarily true for your *characters*. What's most interesting for the story may be to break their little hearts, see their plans go down in flames, or bring about their ironic yet tragic deaths.

Celebrating failure is a tool employed by both improvisers and gamers. A long string of successes for a character can feel great for a while, but players may start to feel restless or bored if the challenges are consistently too easy. Conversely, too many failures can be disheartening and drain motivation. It's important to find a balance, which is what you explore in the following exercise. You'll be telling a story together about a single character, introducing various successes and complications along the way.

- **Player A starts a story with a declaration that establishes the main character. ("Tiara went to the store.")**
- **Player B adds a sentence that starts with the word "fortunately" and furthers the plot in a fortuitous way. ("Fortunately, she had exact change to buy her soy milk.")**
- **Player C adds a sentence that starts with the word "unfortunately" and furthers the plot, but introduces misfortune. ("Unfortunately, the cashier was her archrival at her boxing gym, Emilio.")**
- **Continue switching between fortunate and unfortunate plot developments, until the story reaches a logical end.**

EXPANSION!

Give yourself the freedom to decide if you will add a "fortunately" or "unfortunately" sentence next. This lets the story feel more organic with the rise and fall of the character's fortune. See what new patterns emerge!

✦ TIPS! ✦

This narrative structure may feel a little forced. That's okay! The goal isn't to tell the best story, but to practice advancing the plot with a mix of good and bad outcomes.

Consider how to add an element to the story without negating what just happened. If something unfortunate happened, let it ride! The character will have to achieve their goals some other way. If something good happened, don't take it away! Let the character have their successes, but throw in a new obstacle.

!? ONE WORD AT A TIME

In gaming, as in improv, we should avoid **pre-scripting**—when we're already planning out the story and our next moves several steps ahead. It takes us out of the present and increases the possibility that our ideas won't fit into what's needed in the moment. Even in a combat session, when we might think it's wise to plan ahead, we can't control the outcome of the rolls before ours. Our close-up melee move doesn't work if another player has pushed our foe out of range. We need to be ready to adapt.

This exercise focuses on telling a story collaboratively on a granular level—one word at a time. The goal is to remain focused, flexible, and ready to react to the moment.

- **The facilitator suggests a genre as the initial inspiration for a story.**
- **Players work in pairs to tell a story one word at a time, for about 1 minute. It's okay if they don't finish the story.**
- **Pairs combine into groups of four to tell a new story with a new genre, for 1–2 minutes. (If you have fewer than 8 players, skip to the next step.)**
- **Everyone returns to one group and tells a new story in a new genre for 1–2 minutes. Continue until the story comes to a logical end.**

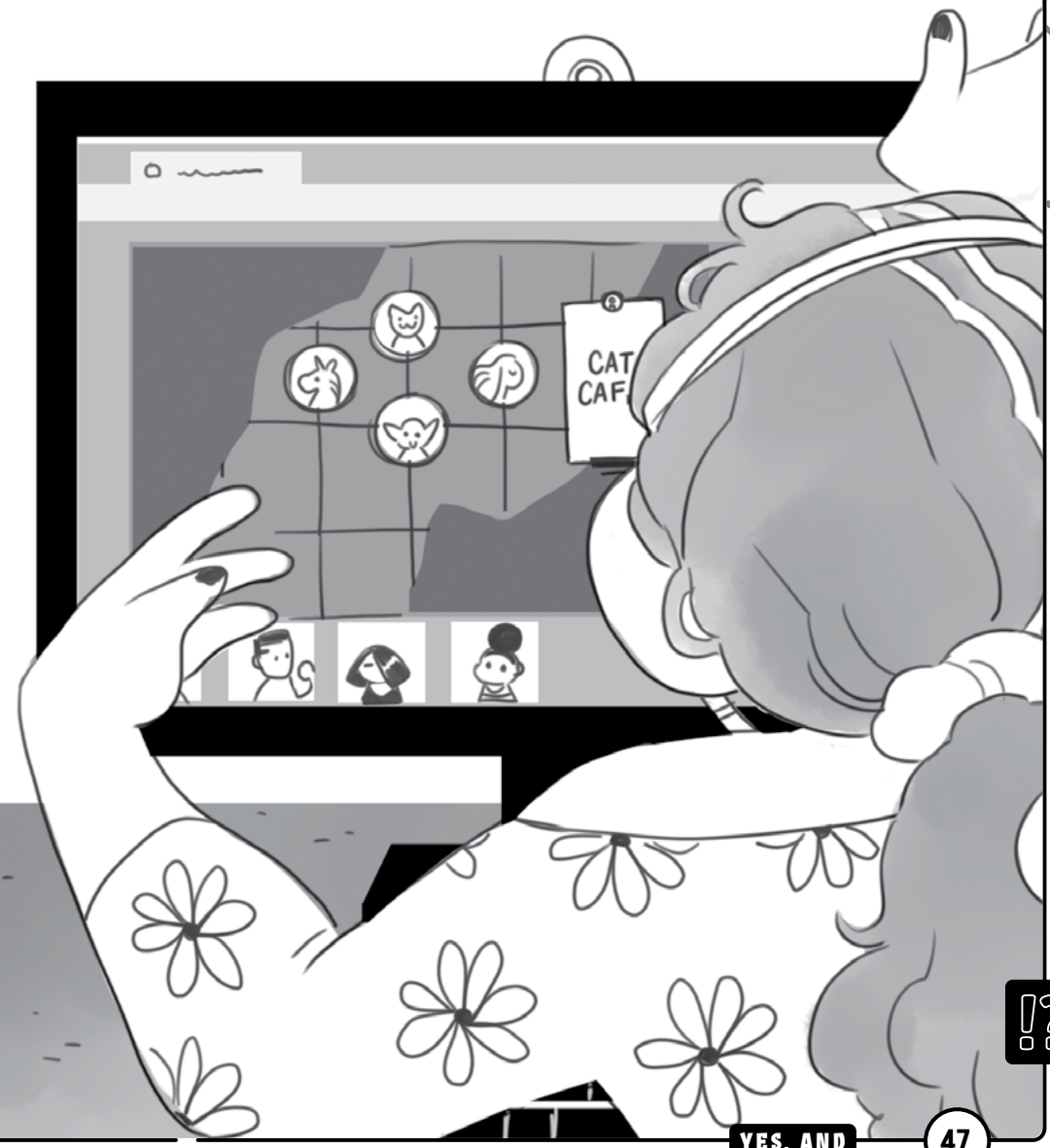
✦ TIPS! ✦

It's easy to lose the thread of the plot due to run-on sentences or misheard words. To help make sentences clear, players can either say "period" after their word to indicate the end of the sentence or before their word to start a new sentence. Players are also encouraged to pause at any time to repeat back the last few words or make sure they heard the right word.

To give players more focus for their story, add in a few key plot points to include. ("Someone goes on a journey," "Something is lost," "Someone reveals a secret.")

EXPANSION!

This exercise has many variations. You could expand to telling the story one sentence at a time, but I find "First Half/Second Half" to be particularly fun and challenging. Player A starts with the first half of a sentence ("Once upon a time, there was..."). Player B finishes A's sentence, and starts the first half of their own. ("...a bard named Kanesha. And every day, Kanesha went to..."). The story ends when someone finishes their partner's sentence and instead of adding their own, concludes with "the end."



I'M A TREE

Dare to be dull! Good improv doesn't come out of trying to be funny, but by connecting to something real and specific. Go with the obvious response to the offers on the table, so you don't find yourself in a scene that's so burdened with wacky elements that you lose control of where it's going. Giving the scene what it needs can feel more satisfying than introducing something off-the-wall, and puts less work on the other players to justify it. So if you're starting a game with a gritty sci-fi setting, you might want to leave your character concept of a winged were-tiger for another time. Sure, the group could make it work, but why make your fellow players struggle to justify it?

This exercise demonstrates how to thread multiple offers onto a single foundational idea and build something as a group. As you're playing, try not to think too hard about the "best" thing you could add. Just add whatever makes sense to you.

- **Everyone gathers in a wide circle, if the space allows. If not, determine another way to spotlight players.**
- **Player A moves into the center and says, "I'm a tree," while holding a tree-like pose. (Make sure to only hold poses that are comfortable for you.)**
- **Player B joins Player A, adds a related element ("I'm a squirrel!"), and makes an approximate pose.**
- **Player C joins in with a third element that relates to either offer or ties them both together. ("I'm an apple on the tree," or "I'm the squirrel's big bushy tail!" or "I'm a nut the squirrel is hiding in the tree.")**
- **Player A leaves while saying who they're taking with them, either Player B or C. (For example, "I'll take the nut!" refers to Player C.) This leaves the other person to start the next round as the new Player A.**
- **The new Player A repeats their previous offer to start the round. (For example, if they were Player B before, they'd say, "I'm a squirrel.")**
- **Continue until everyone has participated a few times.**

EXPANSION!

To make things more challenging, try playing without adding any animals or people, and just be inanimate objects. Or add adjectives ("I'm a large, leafy tree," or "I'm a just-past-its-sell-by-date apple.")

You can also advance the game to "Genre Tree," in which the group decides on a film or game genre (science fiction, Old West, cyberpunk, fantasy) This adds the challenge of maintaining the genre's tone (promoting buy-in) and keeping every element relevant to the setting.

✦ TIPS! ✦

You don't have to always start with "I'm a tree," but it takes the pressure off Player A to come up with something to start off the exercise. Also, remember that if you have a great idea but someone else says theirs first, that's okay! Enjoy their great idea, and be flexible about letting yours go. You will no doubt have other great ideas in the future and can come in with those. To come in now might negate the offers already established.

!? TABLEAU

When you veer too far from group expectations, the other players may find it difficult to justify why your offer makes sense. Don't take advantage of a "Yes, and" mindset by throwing a velociraptor into the cyberpunk heist game if that cross-over doesn't work. If it can't be connected back somehow to the established fiction, the group's response may be less "yes, that's perfect" and more "um... okay?"

This exercise could be considered an expansion of "I'm a Tree" (page 48). It really drives home the idea of the group buying into the setting.

- **As a group, decide on a physical setting where one would find a lot of different objects (living room, toy store, command deck of a spaceship).**
- **One player enters the space and declares that they're an object in that location ("I'm a wingback chair over here against the wall.") and poses to show the approximate size and shape of the object.**
- **One at a time, everyone enters and adds something new. ("I'm a fireplace, with dying embers," or "I'm thick velvet curtains in front of a window.")**
- **Continue until everyone has added something to the tableau. If you want, give each player a chance to pop out of their spot, view the tableau as a whole, and then hop back in.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Make sure you pick a location that everyone's familiar enough with that they can imagine what types of objects make sense there. You could also add a genre or tone by saying "1960s ad agency" or "spooky Victorian parlor."

As you play, remember a few guidelines we've mentioned before: "dare to be dull" (page 19) and "one weird thing" (page 39). If you think the room needs a lamp, be the lamp. If someone already said they're a mysteriously glowing book, that's spooky enough; you don't also need a time machine in the corner. People will appreciate you coming in as the object that was obviously needed (like the light switch!) rather than something that's disconnected from the setting, or that pulls focus away from other fun details.

Possible modifications for accessibility or online play include turning off and on cameras (or starting out of frame and moving into frame), or everyone playing with eyes closed and imagining the space.

EXPANSION!

Try making something that's more than inanimate objects in a room, like a dinosaur, a sunset, a blinking eye, the letter W, three intersecting triangles, or a taffy-pulling machine. Everyone could announce their component one by one, or you could have 60 seconds to make the whole thing together, but silently, without any pointing or directing. This helps prevent one person from imposing their idea on everyone else. It also gives people the opportunity to see what others are doing and adjust as needed.

SENSE STORY

Envisioning what's happening in a scene helps ground us in the story and adds to the cinematic feel. We can describe the creeping shadows of the haunted wood or the harsh neon lights of our cyberpunk city. We can describe the chill of the wind, the clinking of mugs in a tavern, the bitter taste of a healing potion.

This exercise helps remind us of all the ways we can "Yes, and" details by adding embellishments. It's great for GMs and players alike! After you've played through this exercise, try out "Color and Advance" (page 122) to practice blending all these ways that you can paint a scene.

- **Assign one player to be the Storyteller, and 3–4 others are the Retellers. Each Reteller is assigned an area related to the senses to elaborate on: light and color, sound, taste and smell, and physical touch and temperature.**
- **The Storyteller talks for 45 seconds, telling a short story, focusing just on the facts, with little embellishment. It can be a made-up story, or they can recount what they did over the weekend or anything else that's easy to come up with.**
- **Each Reteller tells the story again in 1 minute, adding descriptions focusing on their assigned sense. It's okay if they don't finish the story.**
- **After each Reteller has had a turn, the Storyteller recounts the story again, adding any of the details they heard from the Retellers that they particularly enjoyed.**

STRING OF PEARLS

Telling a story in chronological order can be more difficult than you think! We may want to have a flashback or want to ret-con to change some details. Jumping around the timeline can help make the story more cohesive and is also a fun way to play with the narrative structure. Some games are even designed to be told out of order!

This exercise allows us to thread a story together, piece by piece, in any order. We go back in time to justify choices and jump ahead to set certain story elements in place so we can enjoy the journey of how we get there.

- **Establish a representation of your story's timeline—one side is the start of the story, and one side is the end. (You can designate opposite ends of a room, or draw a line in your online playspace.)**
- **Decide on a genre for your story.**
- **Player A moves to either the start or the end of the story, and says a single sentence.**
- **Player B moves to the other end of the story, and adds a new sentence.**
- **Each time a player adds a sentence, players repeat the whole story in order, from the "start" side to the "end" side.**
- **Players continue to add sentences to the story, in any spot on the timeline, until the story is complete.**

♦ TIPS! ♦

Some sentences add fun new plot elements, but many end up justifying choices while introducing smaller bits to the story. The goal is to end with a cohesive story in which all plot elements are resolved.

EXPANSION!

If you have a smaller group, you can make a longer sentence by allowing players to add multiple sentences in different spots. For example, if Player A provides the first sentence, they can later move to a different spot in the timeline to add their new sentence. But remember that the players always repeat the whole story when a new sentence is added, so Player A would need to move back to the start, say the first sentence, and then move to the spot of their second sentence. This adds an extra layer of chaos as players try to remember who was in what order!

You can also start without clearly defining the first and last sentences. Just indicate which side is which, and players can add to any part of the timeline on their turn.

CHARACTERS

At the start of a game, your character might just have a class ("mage"), a role in the party ("the face"), or a descriptor ("rookie"). The prospect of fleshing that out into a multifaceted character in a short time might be daunting. But gamers have an advantage that improvisers don't—you can take time to think about your characters, talk it out with the group, even write up whole backstories. You have time to understand their motivations, goals, and thoughts about the other characters.

But all this is still just on paper. How do you actually embody your character, or at the very least make one character sound different from the other? How can you throw a little roleplay into your roleplaying?

Here's where improv comes back in. There are lots of tricks you can use to build a character from a single idea. This idea will become your **touchstone**, which you can always go back to should you ever ask yourself, "What would my character do?"

Start Small

Regardless of the type of character you're playing, you can start with a single defining feature. Maybe it's how you talk (slowly, breathlessly, slightly louder than socially acceptable), a facial expression (raised eyebrows, pursing your lips, constantly sniffing), or a physicality (snapping your fingers, wringing your hands, tapping your foot). It might be a strong drive or opinion (you must obtain the sacred jewel, you believe in finding the good in all people, you want to own a dog). Or you might start with a simple fact about your character (you laugh easily, you'd do anything for your friends, you've traveled the world). For simplicity, we've lumped these facts and feelings together under the term **point of view**. Your character's point of view is their "deal" and often informs their larger view of the world.

Viola Spolin says, "Character is intrinsic in everything we do on stage." Whatever small mannerism or point of view you've started with can be the touchstone of your character, and further character development will unfurl from it.

Ask "If That, Then What?"

In improv, the first few seconds of a scene tell the audience who your character is. If you started a scene tapping your foot, you've established that your character is someone who taps their foot a lot. You didn't know that was going to be your character when you went onstage, but here you are. Tapping your foot is now your touchstone. So keep tapping your foot, and ask yourself, "If that's true, then what else is true?" If your character always taps their foot, then what else does that say about them?

These new facts will surface as the scene progresses and may be influenced by endowments your scene partner might give you. Consider this example line of thought during a scene: "If my character taps their foot a lot, I must be nervous about something. I'm hiding a secret. I've endowed my scene partner as my sister. Maybe I shrunk her favorite sweater? Wait, she just endowed me as working long hours at the bank. Scratch the sweater. I'm planning a bank heist! But I love my sister, so I'm going to ask for her help." (This example also shows how you can easily let go of one idea when another offer is made—ideas aren't true until they're said aloud.)

By asking yourself, "If that, then what?" you've essentially said "Yes, and" to yourself and started building on your touchstone. During a game, you can apply this same method to go beyond what's written on your character sheet, and discover more about your character through play.

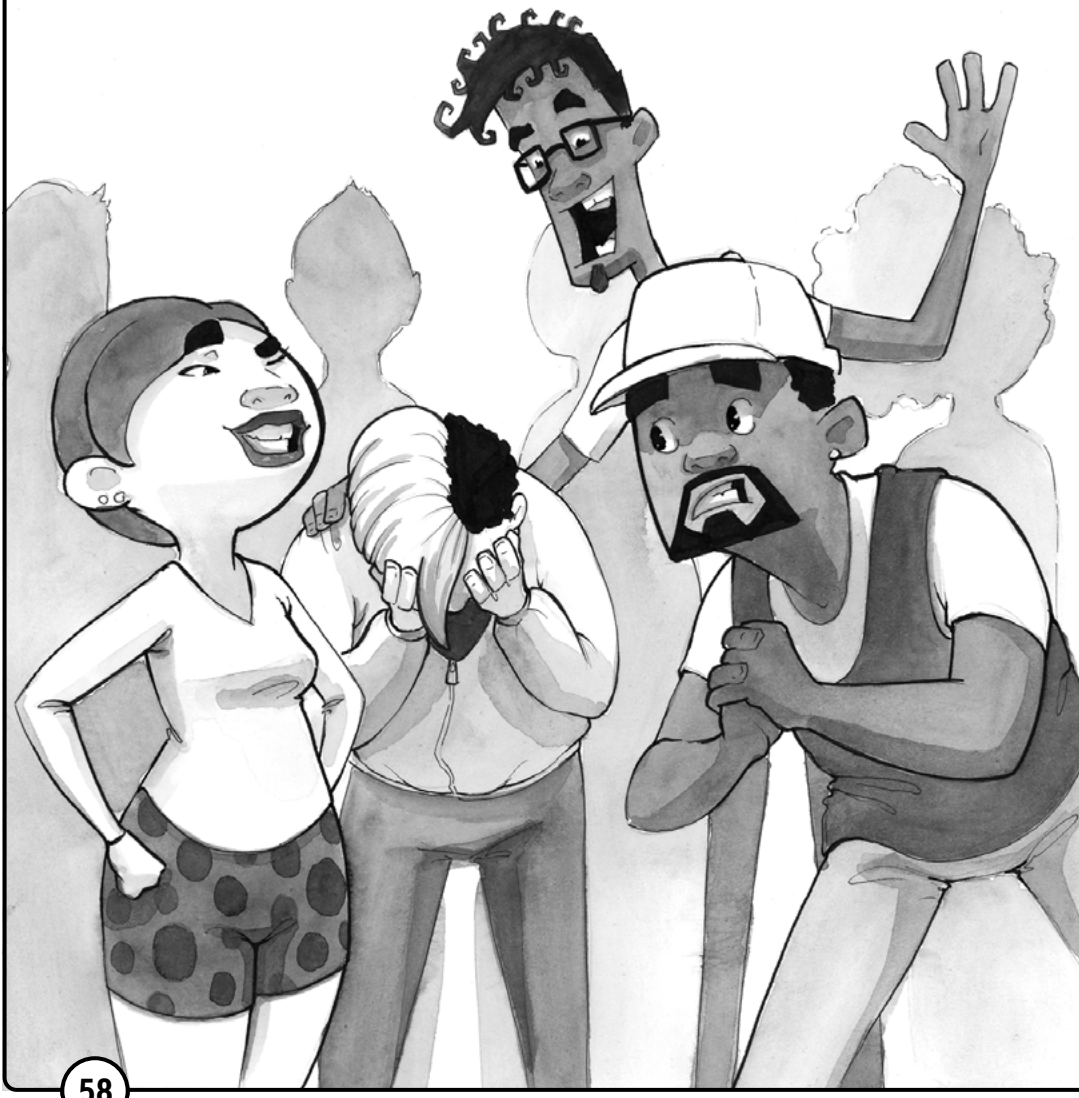
Another way to think of it is to ask "*Why* is this true?" and to justify your answer, you have established more supporting facts. "Why am I tapping my foot? Because I'm nervous. Why am I nervous? Because I'm planning a bank heist." Rather than adding more on top of your offer, you're digging deeper into the foundation and discovering what's already there.

Return to Your Touchstone

Whether you're on the stage or at the game table, it's possible to lose your character and not know what to do or say next. Or perhaps you get so caught up in a moment that you drop your character's unique voice or mannerisms. In these moments of uncertainty, you can always

go back to your touchstone. Start tapping your foot again, and that will bring you back to the solid foundation you laid for your character.

Anything can be a touchstone. In this chapter, you explore what you can do in just a few lines of dialogue, and in ***Scenework*** (page 132), you build on touchstones to discover even more about your character. You can find another character-focused exercise in the expansion of "Three Things" (page 19).



THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION: WHY?

By **James Aaron Oh**

When you create an NPC, what are the questions you start asking about them? Do you begin with their voice? What do they look like? How do others react to them? While asking these questions feed into each other, further fleshing out this character, the most important one you should ask is: Why? Why do they exist? A pretty weighty question, but the more you ask why, the more your characters come to life.

Let's take a simple shop owner. Why do they exist in your world? The simple answer is to make money. Great! They have a simple motivation. But what if you want them to be a little more than a shopkeep the players forget 20 minutes later? The solution is something you've already done. Ask why again. Why do they want to make money? You could go for something simple: to survive, but you can also stretch it further. Say they need to pay back a debt. Now we're onto something interesting! Keep going. Why do they need to pay back a debt? They borrowed from a local crime boss. Why did they borrow from the crime boss? Their child is sick with an unknown disease they've needed to pay for. Why do they have the disease? The child went into the forest at night and encountered a witch, and on and on it goes.

Your simple shopkeep has transformed into a desperate parent who would do anything for their child. The world has expanded to have intrigue and magic. And when your PCs run into this NPC shop owner, the way they interact with your players will be filled with motivation. Whether they choose to turn them over to the crime lord or implore the PCs to heal their child, you know the shop owner will act according to the motivation you have determined fit for their circumstance. All by asking the simple question of why.

PLAYING OUTSIDE YOUR CULTURE

by James Mendez Hodes

Playing a character from a culture you yourself don't share is a gradual, iterative process to realize over several play sessions.

As you conceptualize your character, research negative and positive cultural stereotypes to ensure they embody none of them. Especially avoid religious or political extremism, culturally coded bigotry, and ethnic accents or slurs. Legitimate cultural expressions that appear in stereotypes (a Black American character who raps, for instance) might be acceptable in well-rounded characters, but we'll cover those in a minute.

The first few times you portray this character, establish a comfortable baseline using touchstones (page 56) unrelated to their culture. Monitor others' reactions to your portrayal for signs of discomfort. If you stray into harmful tropes, don't panic—simply apologize and course-correct next time you play. In one-shots or brief NPC appearances, you might never go past this baseline phase. That's fine!

Once you and your table feel confident with your baseline, add cultural touchstones like art forms, religious practices, or political concerns, one at a time. It's a character-level version of the principle from "Don't Forget the Doo Rag" (page 114). Take it slow, draw on your research, and err on the side of too little. Again, monitor others' reactions; walk it back to your baseline if you or someone else feels uncomfortable. Try a different cultural touchstone before you return to this one.

This approach gradually builds your facility with cultural expression and your table's comfort with your portrayal (and comfort with holding you accountable). Hopefully you'll wind up with a character whose identity has some elements that arise from their culture and some that don't. Remember always that others, especially those closer to the cultural stakes than you, are the final arbiters of whether you got it right—and whether you get to keep trying.

Bad Guys

Never tie villainy's origin or nature to marginalized identity, lest others interpret you as saying that identity leads to evil. If your villain is a Mongolian wrestler, they can fight the heroes using traditional Mongolian wrestling, but it would not be okay for Mongolian culture to have driven them to wrongdoing.

Culturally Specific Settings

If every character in a certain game has a specific ethnicity—say, in a game about Bollywood stars or Russian airwomen—don't try to rep that culture at all. The system and setting's built-in cultural signifiers do the work for you. Culturally focused games already have so many signifiers that attempts to play them up are unnecessary at best, stereotypical at worst.

If You Have an Audience

With streamed or otherwise publicly viewable games, stakes are higher. Play someone from your own culture or the setting's most common cultures. As with responsible film casting, players of color with experience in the process described earlier might try characters from related backgrounds—for example, a First Nations player rolling a PC from another Indigenous demographic. If another player belongs to a certain culture, you might create a PC from that culture with their guidance and oversight, but you need a preexisting excellent rapport with them. If they aren't enthusiastic about the idea, drop it.

For more advice on this topic, visit *jamesmendezhodes.com/blog/2019/2/14/may-i-play-a-character-from-another-race*.

PLAYING THE OTHER

By Mary C. Parker

Why do we need to play the other? What makes it so intriguing to play someone else? Playing the other can sometimes feed our inner subconscious to live out our assumptions about who we think someone is. You must recognize that there are limitations in what's possible based on not being that person, having that culture, or knowing first-hand their lived experiences. What matters most is how can we S.L.A.M. your expectations of what's possible. S.L.A.M. is an acronym to remember to check our stereotypes, recognize your limitations, determine ways to align with your character, and understand your motivations for the role.

Stereotypes

How can you raise your consciousness to not portray someone based on a negative connotation of who we think they are? What stereotypes should you consider that already exist within you about this other person? You must do the self-work in understanding your own biases of who you think you're portraying and continually ask if your choices are rooted in a stereotype that won't lead to an accurate portrayal.

Limitations

Secondly, you need to recognize your limitations when playing another person. Do you have a personal connection to the character you're portraying? Have you been to that part of the world, spent any personal time with someone from that culture, or been involved in their community in any way? If not, you're limited in your scope of understanding who they are and what they experience. You shouldn't just assume about someone's culture or community because that leads to stereotypes. Instead, recognize the gaps and use them as a backstory for your character.

Alignment

What do you already know to be true about people from this community? For example, if you know that a community has been colonized by a certain group of people, what else can be true? Their original language may be lost, so perhaps this character is on a journey to reclaim their culture and learn more about their history before colonization. Often in

improv, asking "if this is true, then what else is true" can help deepen a reality and highlight truth for what is possible for a character beyond stereotypes. This provides an intentional way to align with culture by accepting reality and building on what's possible.

Motivation

What is your motivation for choosing this character to play? Is it serving the story or plot you're creating to add in this specific person? If yes, how can you play this character to the height of your intelligence? What motivates your character in the world that has been created? How would this character fit in? Would they be marginalized, or have power? Using motivation can help ground your understanding of how this character could show up in this fictional world.

The truth is there is no one right way to play someone else because we all have individual experiences and ways we relate to a community of people. So, we should give up the goal of playing the other perfectly because it is not possible. Unless you aspire to be Rachel Dolezal and like others before her, your character should not be portrayed as a costume. Instead, it's important to raise your consciousness and do the work to understand what you already know about a community and what you assume to be true about a culture of people so you can then begin to interrupt stereotypes and tropes and lean into more authenticity in these real and fictional worlds.

To learn more, check out *www.whitesupremacyculture.info*.

LEAD WITH YOUR BODY

We add physical features to our characters without even realizing it. The high-school queen bee may lift up their nose at everyone. The shy but gifted hacker may hunch her shoulders. By asking yourself, "If that, then what?" you can easily come up with a physical mannerism to bring your character to life.

This exercise will help you remember all the different parts of your body that you can use to find a mannerism. You may also discover how one physicality can unlock other ideas about your character. Use the suggestions table or make up your own!

- **Everyone moves casually around the space, in no particular direction. Maintain your regular, neutral posture. Beware of becoming a circling school of fish; switch up your direction. You can make eye contact as you pass people if you'd like, or not.**
- **The facilitator, who can either participate or stand off to the side, calls out a body part for everyone to lead with as they move around the space. ("Lead with both shoulders.")**
- **Everyone adjusts their posture to accentuate their movement with this body part.**
- **After 20 seconds or so, the facilitator calls out a new body part to lead with.**
- **Continue until everyone has changed how they're moving five or six times.**

1	Chin	6	Knees
2	Ear (just one)	7	Nose
3	Elbows	8	Ribcage
4	Forehead	9	Shoulders (one or both)
5	Hips (one or both)	10	Toes

✦ TIPS! ✦

When changing up your posture, think about what else your body does as a result. If you lead with your shoulders, does that mean you're leaning forward a lot? How does that change your speed? Do you move at a more plodding pace? Does your expression change?

Also, think about any emotions that might come up. If you're leaning forward and moving fast, are you in a hurry? Does that make you feel agitated, or nervous?

EXPANSION!

Even if you're seated at a table, you have a lot of ways to embody a character. Try exploring all the things you can do with your hands and arms:

1	Keep your hands on your hips	6	Wring your hands
2	Keep your hands in your pockets	7	Crack your knuckles
3	Snap your fingers	8	Cross your arms
4	Run your fingers through your hair	9	Roll your shoulders
5	Rest your chin in your hand	10	Hunch your shoulders

MOVING IN MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

For a deep dive into physicality, check out "The Eight Efforts" theory developed by Rudolf Laban. He identifies four dimensions in which we move and how we can create expressive movements by varying our direction, weight, speed, and flow. It's pretty interesting stuff and is often studied extensively in theater and dance, but being even a little familiar with it can give you a fun way to combine different types of movements.

BEEN WAITING LONG?

If your character is an ice-dancer, how do you wash the dishes? How might you behave on a first date if you've never traveled outside your hometown? How do you hail a cab if you're afraid of bees?

In contrast to "Lead with Your Body" (page 64), which starts with a mannerism, this exercise starts with a fact about your character and explores what other ideas flow from that touchstone and how that might inform your character—all in a few brief lines of dialogue.

- **The facilitator gives Players A and B a defining characteristic about each of their characters. You can use the point of view suggestions (page 161) or pick one half of a relationship (page 166) to get your starting character.**
- **Player A starts the scene onstage. After a few moments, Player B enters, and they exchange the following lines:**

  Player B: *Hi.*

  Player A: *Hello.*

  Player B: *Been waiting long?*

  Player A: *Ages.*
- **Repeat the exercise with new players and different characteristics until everyone has had a turn with both sides of the dialogue.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Let the defining characteristic of your character influence how you interact with your scene partner. How do you change your stature? The volume of your voice? Do you make intense eye contact, or avoid it?

EXPANSION!

Instead of a four-line scene, players can move around the room greeting each other with the same line: "Hi, how are you?" The facilitator calls out different facts or feelings a character might have, and the players switch up how they say "Hi, how are you?" accordingly.

You can also expand the exercise with a longer exchange of neutral dialogue, either by adding additional lines to the script given here or making up your own.

WHAT'S MY NAME

By Erica Riddick

Despite naming being a basic part of improv... and well, life... do you struggle with naming yourself or scene partners, remembering names, and not feeling boxed in by a name? We strive to carefully discover who we are from the first moments of walking into a blank scene, one line and one scene at a time. Yet, names, which often happen early in this discovery process, can inadvertently limit players and scenes. This is a gender-neutral naming game with a physicality twist as a memory device.

- **Players gather in a circle or find another way to designate when someone has the spotlight.**
- **Player A goes into the center of the circle with a body part-inspired movement.**
- **Player A calls out Player B, either with eye contact or a gesture.**
- **Player B uses movement as they go to meet Player A.**
- **Both players can use their movement to inform their character and interpret their partner's character based on their movement.**
- **Player A endows Player B with a gender-neutral name in the opening line, and Player B names Player A in the follow-up line.**
- **Player A then invents a reason to leave the scene, maintaining their movement.**
- **Player B continues to embody their movement and calls out Player C.**
- **Continue play until everyone has been named.**
- **Repeat the format of play, but this time, players call each other by their character names.**
- **Scene transitions may run longer than two lines but are designed for practicing name recall. The idea is to get in, find a reason to call in another player, and get out. As the scene progresses, gender is left to be determined by each player for themselves.**

EXPANSION!

Players can decide whether to name or be named.

You can also heighten the game by having all names be endowed in alphabetical order (Player A with an A name, Player B with a B name, and so on).

To add an extra challenge, make names of the country where the game is being played off-limits.

Alternatively, instead of using names, nicknames can be the appellation given, along with a justification. ("We're such a good baking team, Lefty... when I get tired of stirring with my right hand, you step right in.")

✦ TIPS! ✦

Gender neutrality goes beyond assigning character names. This game is a great opportunity to normalize using gender-neutral familial names and pronouns, like parent instead of mother or father, sibling instead of sister or brother, and child or children instead of daughter or son. It's also an opportunity to experiment with gender-neutral pronouns like thon, ze, and siya.

Researching gender-neutral names from other cultures and regions of the world can further open possibilities for player development and diversity of characters and locations.

Don't forget that ultimately, gender is imbued in names and is not inherently assigned. If unsure whether an established or created new name is gender neutral, this game is a low-stakes way to experiment, including playing with assigning opposite genders to a gendered nomenclature.

CONVERSATION TRIO

While "Lead with Your Body" (page 64) explored full-body characterization, you can also establish a unique character through just how you speak. You might change up your voice in a particular way, over-accentuate a part of your face, or take on a specific emotion. GMs regularly use this skill to differentiate between various NPCs or make up new NPCs on the fly.

We've grouped these exercises to be played in the same format. You can choose one, two, or all three, in any order! You can also mix up who is using which style from different categories.

- **In groups of two or three, players start a conversation.**
- **After about 30 seconds, the facilitator calls out a new way to speak. Everyone changes their style accordingly and continues their conversation. (The facilitator can also go from pair to pair to give the instructions, if that's easier than pausing the whole group.)**
- **The facilitator contines to call out new speaking methods for about five or six variations.**

VOCAL SWITCH

You can modulate the way you talk to achieve a distinct voice, which can inform a particular emotion or personality trait (for a deeper dive into just this aspect, check out "Dinner with Myself" on page 72).

1	You're very breathy	6	You're low-pitched
2	You swallow your words	7	You're nasal
3	You talk rapidly	8	You over-enunciate
4	You talk slowly	9	You hiss the letter "s"
5	You're high-pitched	10	You're monotone

FACIAL SWITCH

Even a small change in your face can result in a completely different character. You have your mouth, eyes, nose, and more to play with!

1	You have very wide eyes	6	You talk with a wide mouth
2	You squint a lot	7	You talk through your teeth
3	You make too much eye contact	8	You smile a lot
4	You puff out your cheeks	9	You purse your lips
5	You wrinkle your nose	10	You bite your lips

EMOTIONAL SWITCH

If you find that your character is always aloof and unflappable, you can choose an emotion to give your character some quick and easy depth.

1	Bashful	6	Peaceful
2	Irritated	7	Ecstatic
3	Bored	8	Resentful
4	Loving life	9	Incredulous
5	Disgusted	10	Suspicious

✦ TIPS! ✦

You can stick to small talk, so you don't have to think too hard about what to say. You're practicing how to speak as different characters, not performing a scene. But you may find that when you change to a new way of speaking, you discover a new character, and the nature of your conversation might change. Explore that change!

All of these different ways to talk are also solid alternatives to attempting accents. Accents can be tricky and distracting, and even stereotyping and racist. And on those same lines, be mindful not to portray real speech impediments.

DINNER WITH MYSELF

By Brandon Wentz

Creating distinct character voices is a common stressor for many players and GMs. With the popularity of shows like *Critical Role* and the growing number of actual play podcasts that feature trained actors and voiceover artists, it's easy to feel that performative pressure in our home games. The following are a few elements of your own voice and how they can be adjusted to show you don't need to be a trained voiceover artist to create interesting and distinguishable character voices.

- **VOLUME: LOUDNESS OR INTENSITY**
  How loudly does the character talk? Think of this on a scale from 1–10. Do they work long hours in a noisy bar? Maybe a 7. Are they found deep in the stacks of an ancient library? Probably closer to a 2.
- **PITCH: HIGHNESS OR LOWNESS OF SOUND**
  Where is the pitch of the character's sound? Do they have a high-pitched voice that cuts through the air, or do they have a low, rumbling voice? One easy adjustment to help modify pitch is to simply raise or lower your eyebrows as you speak. This simultaneously raises or lowers the pitch of your voice.
- **PACE: TEMPO OR SPEED**
  How fast or slow does the character talk? Do they ramble at an auctioneer's pace, or is it the slow and lumbering speed of someone who is carefully choosing each and every word?
- **INFLECTION: MODULATION AND PITCH**
  How much variation does the character use in their sentences? Do they have a monotone drone, or do their sentences have a musicality that raises and falls throughout?
- **DICTION: PRONUNCIATION AND ENUNCIATION**
  How well pronounced or crisp are the character's words? Do they hit all their *T*s, *D*s, and *G*s in words, or do words like *something* turn into *sumthin* when they speak?

Here's a game that allows you to experiment with the different ways you can use these elements of your voice. You'll need a few players, some writing utensils, slips of paper, and a hat or bowl.

- **Each player writes down three names (friends, family, celebrities) and puts them into the hat.**
- **Decide who starts and have them draw a name from the hat. Then, using the different elements of volume, pitch, pace, and inflection, adjust your voice to do the best impression of that person you can. (For example, Christopher Walken is known for having a unique inflection pattern; he enunciates his words very strongly, and the pitch of his voice rides high.)**
- **When the other players think they know the impression being done, they write down the name and then join in the impression until everyone at the table has written down their guess. Then the whole group has a conversation in their best impression of that person.**
- **Repeat until all names are used, and then see who guessed the most impressions correctly.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

It's recommended that the names written down are people everyone at the table is *very* familiar with, like characters from a TV show you all watch or a sibling you've all had lunch with recently.

MAKE YOUR CHARACTERS DISTINCT WITH ONE WEIRD THING

A tip from Jay Treat

As a GM, you will need to play a lot of different NPCs you want to keep distinct and you'll often need to invent some on the spot when the PCs stray. No problem:

Choose a body part. Put the character's soul there and see how that makes you move and speak.
Be like an animal: snakey!
Embody any adjective: mischievous!
Be a typical X except for Y: The feminist jock!
Want something: I need to find my sheeeeep!

GOLDEN GOOSE

Heightening is a way of expressing "Yes, and" by turning up the dial on your partner's offer. You might raise the stakes of a scene by increasing the impact of the consequences. You might add more information to expand on a theme or deepen an emotion. You might intensify your reactions to everything your partner says and does. You can create drama, tension, comedy through heightening—whatever your partner's starting point was, you can amplify and build out from there. This makes for great storytelling, be it in improv or gaming.

If you tried out the expansion of "Pass the Movement" (page 12), then you've already played around with heightening. This time, you practice heightening characters and exemplifying "Yes, and" through a structured (and silly) exchange.

- **Everyone gathers in a circle.**
- **Player A approaches another person (Player B). Player A assumes a specific character and says to Player B, "I give you the Golden Goose," while pretending to hand them the goose. Then Player A returns to their spot in the circle.**
- **Player B says, "I take the Golden Goose," and mimes receiving it in a heightened version of Player A's character. If Player A were at a 5, Player B would exaggerate their mannerisms, posture, and voice to about an 8.**
- **The two people on either side of Player B (Players C and D) take on even more heightened versions of the same character and say in unison "They have the Golden Goose!" while gesturing at Player B. They should embody the character to a ridiculous extreme, at a full 10.**
- **The two people on either side of Players C and D (Players E and F) hold out their arms to "frame" the other players, and exclaim, "What a glorious day for the Golden Goose!" Players E and F should crank their characters up to 11.**
- **Everyone drops their characters. Player B adopts a new character and hands the goose to someone new.**
- **Continue until everybody has had a turn giving and receiving the goose.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

You can portray an easily identifiable character (soldier, cowpoke, socialite), or embody a particular emotion (angry, secretive, excited), or a way of speaking as we explored in "Conversation Trio" (page 70). You may want to brainstorm some ideas first, as in the expansion for "Three Things" (page 19).

This exercise needs at least 5 people and is better with even larger groups. If you're playing this game with a smaller group, you can drop the roles of Players E and F.

You can also drop the physical movements and just play with heightening the silly voices.

HOT SEAT

By Lizzie Stark

This warm-up exercise can be ported into almost any game that has characters. I learned about it from my friends on the Norwegian larp scene. I like it because it is a low-stakes exercise that does several jobs simultaneously. It deepens characters, forges bonds among participants, gets participants warmed up, and generates fiction in a low-key way. I've used "Hot Seat" to help participants develop pre-existing larp and tabletop characters, and help actors in pieces of playable theater generate well-rounded characters that will stand up to audience prodding.

In this exercise, participants use the characters they will be playing in your game. If you're not playing a particular game and just want to try it, divide participants into pairs or trios and ask them to divide the characters "the actor," "the producer," and "the director" among them. You can also edit these to be any set of three archetypes that makes sense for your particular group.

Importantly, you're not bound to anything you say during "Hot Seat"! If you discover later that your favorite color is really blue, not black, nothing will explode. Whoever is in the Hot Seat should not worry about being clever—just have fun and give the first answer that pops into your brain.

- **Divide the participants into groups of 2 or 3.**
- **Player A sits in the Hot Seat. Player A has a set amount of time on the Hot Seat (about 1–3 minutes).**
- **Players B and optionally C sit facing them and ask rapid-fire questions to them until the round is over. Players B and C can ask questions as simple as "How many siblings do you have?" or as deep as "What is your greatest fear?"**
- **Player A answers in character, but Players B and C ask questions as themselves.**
- **When time is up, switch out who's in the Hot Seat. Continue until everyone has had a turn.**
- **You may wish to gather participants into a single group and introduce (or re-introduce) their characters at the end of the exercise.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

The Hot Seat can be an actual chair that participants move into or out of, or it can simply pass around with turn-taking.

QUESTIONING TAKES ENERGY

In many ways, the questioners have the tougher and more tiring role here, as they must continuously generate interesting questions. If you use groups of two—one questioner and one person on the Hot Seat—the time spent on the Hot Seat should be 2 minutes max to avoid questioning fatigue. If you're facilitating in a physical space, circulate from group to group, inserting your own questions to give tired or struggling participants some relief.

EMBODY YOUR CHARACTER

A tip from Jay Treat

My best advice for having fun at the table is to choose a character who moves, speaks, and thinks differently from yourself; inhabit that character as often as possible. Roll your dice as them. Plot your character advancement as them. Joke with your friends as them. Eat snacks as them. This works for board games with "no roleplaying" too. Just play. The more you play, the more fun you'll have, regardless of the game.

RELATIONSHIPS

To quote Mark Sutton, "Nobody in an improv audience anywhere has ever turned to the person sitting next to them and said, 'Man, I sure hope they fix that bike.'" While the action of a scene can be fun to watch, what drives the action is the relationship between the characters onstage. This is ultimately what captures the audience's interest; without it, it's just two people talking about how to fix a bike.

Likewise in games, a vital component of creating characters is linking them with relationships. Some games have rules for linking characters, often completed as a group, and pregenerated characters for set scenarios often come with a list of who's who and how you know them. It's even more fruitful to know how you *feel* about the other characters and what you might need from them. These motivations will help drive the story far beyond what you might get from "So you all meet in a tavern."

The danger in letting circumstance throw two characters together is that it doesn't guarantee a meaningful connection. In improv, we often warn against transactional scenes—customer and salesperson, diner and server, hairdresser and client—because the relationship is often superficial. In most cases, they're strangers. There might be plenty of opportunities for comedy, but building a relationship will require commitment from the players. And even once you have a relationship, it requires further commitment to take the conversation beyond negotiating and asking questions.

Always ask yourself: how does your character feel about the other characters? And how do they express this? T. J. Jagodowski and David Pasquesi create scenes as defined by **heat** and **weight**. The "heat" is the nature of the relationship—how hot or cold it is. This goes beyond just "what are you to each other" to include "how you feel about each other." A newlywed couple will have different heat from an estranged couple. Water-cooler buddies will have a different heat from an employee and their boss who used to be their subordinate. Adding to this is "weight," which is how a line is delivered, influenced by the heat

of the relationship. A line delivered with a clear weight carries more information than just the words said and should inform the response.

David Razowsky says that "a scene isn't over until someone changes." An emotional transformation must happen for a scene to be more than a relationship and an initial premise. Characters don't change in a static relationship. To be good storytellers, we must express our relationships through both action and dialogue and create a catalyst in the plot that will challenge the status quo.

YOU MAKE ME FEEL

The starting session of a roleplaying game often follows a basic structure:

- **Define the world (genre and setting)**
- **Craft your character (class, skills, name, backstory)**
- **Create relationships (shared backstory)**

We often create relationships by asking prompting questions. (Who did you betray when they needed you most? Who have you been secretly watching? Who would you protect, no matter what?) The answers to these questions will justify your characters' bonds and why they feel the way they do about each other.

This exercise explores going in the other direction, starting with an emotional link that you can use as a touchstone. If you're ever unsure how to respond in a scene, ask yourself, "How does this person make me feel?" Then tell them! There's no faster way to connect with your character than by saying exactly what you're thinking and feeling. From there, you can discover the rest of the scene. In roleplaying, you can lay out all that subtext on the table and then use your knowledge as players to craft meaningful interactions for your characters.

- **Players work in pairs to complete the following exchange (print out the script from** *www.evilhat.com/home/improv-for-gamers-downloads-2/*, **or prepare it in advance in other accessible formats):**

Player A: *You make me feel [adjective].*

Player B: *You make me feel [adjective].*

Player A: *You are my [adjective] [relationship], [name].*

Player B: *You are my [adjective] [relationship], [name].*

Player A: *We are at [location].*

Player B: *We are at [specific place at that location].*

Player A: *We are talking about [subject, unrelated to location].*

Player B: *You are/I am/We are [doing an action, unrelated to conversation].*

- **Go through the exercise again, switching the roles of Players A and B. You can switch partners if you want to go for a few more rounds.**

Example of "You Make Me Feel"

Player A: *You make me feel excited.*

Player B: *You make me feel responsible.*

Player A: *You are my charming babysitter, Brian.*

Player B: *You are the precocious child I babysit, Lucy.*

Player A: *We are at the DMV.*

Player B: *We are in line for license photos.*

Player A: *We are talking about why I want a puppy.*

Player B: *I am constantly snapping my fingers.*

> ### EXPANSION!
>
> You can use this exercise as a lead-in for a short scene. After the two players complete the "You Make Me Feel" exercise, they can start a scene *in medias res* in that scenario as those characters.

✦ TIPS! ✦

Player B must listen carefully to the endowment Player A gives them. If A says, "You are my fussy granddaughter, Florence," B could respond with, "You are my overbearing grandmother, Nana." To negate A would be to say, "You are my high-school basketball coach, Coach Gabriella." Sure, grandmothers can make great basketball coaches, but this isn't really listening to A's offer. Stick to the obvious other half of the relationship.

An interesting scene needs variety. A scene about two people on a boat, fishing, and talking about fish doesn't have a lot going on. A scene about recent exes stuck on a fishing boat during a corporate team-building exercise, talking about the health of their previously shared dog, while one of them keeps checking their phone for signal, has more possibilities.

This exercise sets up a scene mid-action. Just as when setting up a scene at the table, it's not necessary to narrate an employee entering the boss's office, saying hello, and after some polite chit-chat, getting to why you're here. You can jump to the middle: "...and that's why I'm quitting this job."

I, YOU, WE

Establishing relationships with characters before the game begins is valuable, but you can also establish those facts throughout the game, whenever it feels appropriate.

A quick and easy tip in improv to build a relationship at any time is to make statements with "I," "You," or "We." Other helpful phrases for establishing relationships include "You always" and "I know that, because." You can also add backstory with statements like "Remember when we..." but in improv specifically, we want our scene to be focused on the present, not the past, but it's a fun way to have a quick flashback while establishing history.

In addition to practicing I, You, and We statements, this exercise practices a valuable listening technique: repeating back what your partner just said to you. This helps us stay in the moment and listen to our partners.

- **Players exchange one line at a time, using only I, You, or We statements.**
- **Player A says a line, and Player B repeats it before adding their own line.**

Example of "I, You, We"

Player A: *I love birdwatching.*

Player B: *You love birdwatching. I bought you fancy binoculars for your birthday.*

Player A: *You bought me fancy binoculars for my birthday. You care about my interests.*

Player B: *I care about your interests. You don't even know when my birthday is.*

Player A: *I don't even know when your birthday is. We're in a very one-sided friendship.*

Player B: *We're in a very one-sided friendship. I'm your only friend.*

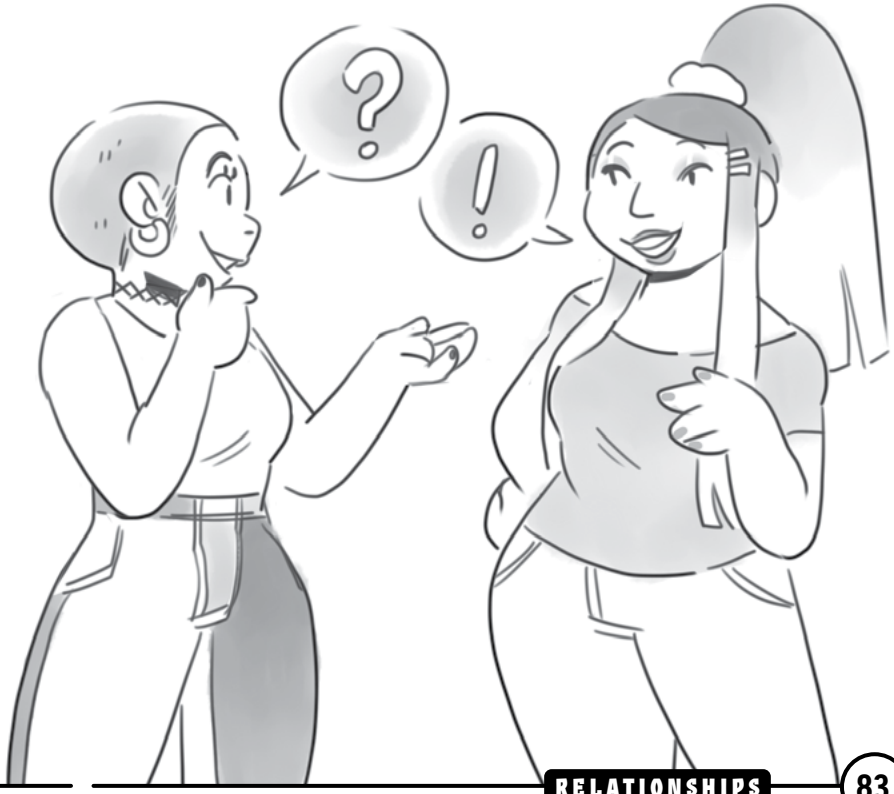
✦ TIPS! ✦

You can do this exercise sitting, standing, facing each other, or facing away from each other. Each variation makes the process feel a little different!

This "scene" can feel awkward and slow. That's okay! It's not supposed to be a realistic conversation.

EXPANSION!

Players face each other, with a lot of space between them. They have a short scene, exchanging one line of dialogue at a time. Whenever someone adds to their character, partner's character, or relationship, they move slightly closer to each other. It might be helpful for the facilitator to call out when these I, You, We statements occur. The scene ends when the players meet in the middle.



RELATIONSHIP GIFTS

Giving an offer is often referred to in improv as giving the gift of information. In this exercise, you take turns giving each other facts about your relationship. Think of it as a two-person version of "Yes! Character Building" (page 38), but really focusing on each offer building on the last, or a version of "I, You, We" (page 82) using just We statements.

- **In pairs, players mime passing a gift back and forth.**
- **With each pass, the giver adds a new fact about their relationship.**

Example of "Relationship Gifts"

Player A: *We're best friends.*

Player B: *We grew up next door to each other.*

Player A: *We have a treehouse that's exactly in the middle of both properties.*

Player B: *We leave each other letters in the treehouse.*

Player A: *We developed our own secret language.*

Player B: *We still use this language in adulthood.*

Player A: *We both work at the same place.*

Player B: *We're code-breakers.*

EXPANSION!

Run through the exercise again, summarizing the same relationship, this time adding how these facts make your character feel about the other. For example:

Player A: *We're best friends.*

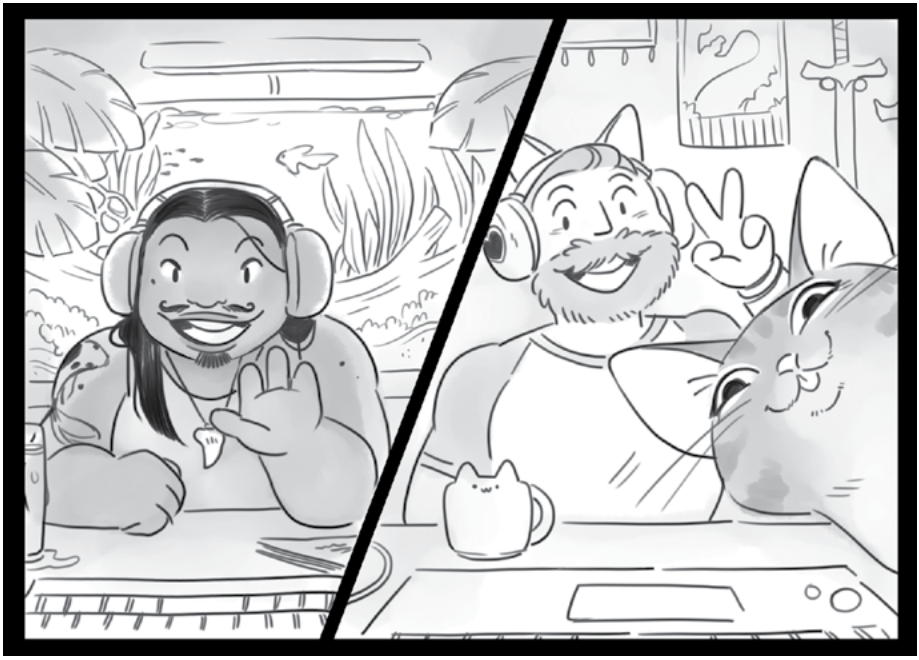
Player B: *As kids, we developed our own language.*

Player A: *That makes me feel valued because we're sharing a secret.*

Player B: *That makes me feel eager to please you.*

Player A: *That makes me feel important because you always make me look good at my job.*

Player B: *That makes me feel pressured because I'm responsible for both our successes.*



TABLETOP JAZZ

By Jay Brown

I played slide trombone and later guitar in various jazz bands throughout my life. In any given song played, especially live, there is the main theme. "Mack the Knife'' for example. We know that song standard all too well. The bassist, drummer, horns, all the musicians are playing that song. But then the solos start. We improv our solos, never written down, never the same way twice, often with callbacks to the song we're performing. The other musicians will play to support, sometimes answering these callbacks. Before long, "Mack the Knife," a standard we all knew, is way different. Sound familiar?

In our tales of those elusive magical game sessions—you know the ones where everyone at the table is excited, engaged, and contributing to the game—everything is all upbeat. Those sessions have everyone on the same page about what the situation is, who the characters are at that moment, and what they as a player care about. They have bought in on the moment, the established lore. We're all playing the same song. I believe this buy-in is a solid factor in getting better games and more magical sessions. I help my players buy into the sessions by getting them to add to the details of the game world, expanding on the fiction as we play. Many new games do this through world-building sessions or mechanics that give players more authority at the table. I ask questions of some or all the players throughout game sessions, and you can too.

These questions are often loaded, and the answers to them are actionable. Use those answers.

"What do you first notice?"

This is great for new people, places, or things. You begin with your skeletal, broad description; address a player character by name—not the player. "Leia, what do you first notice about the palace?"

I like to use this for NPCs that fictionally have relationships with characters, but we, the players, have not witnessed yet. "Han, what do you first notice about Greedo?"

You can even load up this question. "Han, What do you notice that's odd about Greedo?"

A few more: "The club is loud, crowded. What first grabs your attention as you pass the bouncer, Decker?" "You are granted an audience with Jabba; what gifts did you all bring?"

You can tweak these questions in many ways and get actionable results.

GMs often introduce people, places, things with an implied history to the PCs. You can ask questions to fill in these blank implied spaces too! "Calrissian, you say? What was the last job you did together, Han?"

So if The Bronze is your regular watering hole: "Who's your favorite bartender?" "What's the friction with you and the head bouncer?"

Or more loaded, more specific: "What's the friction with you and the *troll* bouncer?"

The key is to use these answers. Reincorporate them into your prep, back into the "song" of the session. I have replaced or merged prepped elements with player responses. Make these answers real by honoring them in the narrative ASAP—make it canon. Yes, this could very well change the story. Don't prep plots is another article, but these changes make a collaborative plot that is now off the rails for sure! You're in that improv space like a jazz band. In this off-the-rails space, players know that their interests have an impact and will keep engaging with the fiction, the mechanics, and the other players—it's tabletop jazz and now you're playing fearlessly!

ASK YOUR PLAYERS FOR SUGGESTIONS

A tip from Hakan Seyalioglu

You know how improvisers ask the audience for suggestions? I do this all the time, especially while running games. What do the guards do during their break? Does the bartender buy the party's story? Even if you're the one who would usually decide the answer, just turn to another player who hasn't spoken in a while and ask them. It'll catch them off-guard and get them invested. And it keeps the story fresh for you!

CLASSIC CAST

Whether in a dungeon crawl, heist, or other team mission; a well-rounded party will (hopefully) have someone capable of overcoming any given obstacle. But a balanced group isn't just important for games with a solid objective (and hopefully lucrative payoff), but also for games that follow character relationships. You'll find ensemble casts in television shows (the sarcastic one, the cool one, the popular one, the oddball, the nerd, the anchor) and movies (the princess, the athlete, the outcast, the brain, the rebel). Each character has a unique defining feature and often an emotional tie to at least one or two other people in the group.

As a scene unfolds onstage, players may jump in as supporting characters. Or, if improvising a longer narrative, they may create scenes highlighting different people in the same world. What's key is that all these characters are believable in the same setting. Even if the stories seem unconnected at the start, it will be satisfying for the audience to see those stories start to overlap.

In an improv show, not everybody is going to be the protagonist. The audience would have a hard time following too many competing storylines. An improviser can provide a perfect addition to a scene with just a line or two. However, roleplaying games have the added challenge of giving everyone equal time in the spotlight. To this end, we build ensemble casts in which all characters are equally important to the plot.

In this exercise, you create your own ensemble cast of characters and a web of relationships, stringing them together.

✦ TIPS! ✦

Group buy-in is extremely important in making an ensemble cast. To make sure everybody feels like they belong in the setting, keep the oddball characters to a minimum. You really only need one secret agent, robot, genie, sasquatch, or alien in your group.

- **Decide on a setting where the characters live or work (bar, space station, school, hospital, fantasy kingdom, small town).**
- **Player A introduces themself as a specific character, including a name and a detail or two, like their job or point of view. ("I'm Kayla, I'm a server at the Daisy Diner, working double shifts to pay off my gambling debts. I absolutely love watching MMA fighting.")**
- **Player B introduces themself as someone who lives in the same world, including a name, a detail or two, and how they feel about one of the other characters already introduced. ("I'm Josh, former high-school quarterback. Now I work at the auto shop in town, and I love my job. I have a wicked crush on Kayla at the diner.")**
- **Continue until everyone has created a character. Make sure that everyone has at least one relationship link.**
- **When the ensemble is complete, everyone says, "Classic cast!" Sometimes it's fun to punctuate this with a group gesture, like jazz hands!**
- **You can repeat the exercise a few more times with different settings or genres.**

GET RID OF THE TABLE

A tip from Meguey Baker

It's easier to take risks when you feel like you're on the same side of the situation. This is a very practical, physical way to help support players so they can make improvised leaps in character: stop playing across a table. Just the physical dynamics of a square or rectangular table creates oppositional forces that can push people into weird interpersonal positions. When you're preparing to host a game, look at the space and make room in a physical way to echo the room you make mentally and emotionally to create fiction with friends. Play in as close to a circle of comfortable seating as you can manage in your space. Make sure there's enough light and air and the temperature is comfortable. Have clipboards and end tables for dice and papers, even if there is still a table, so the intensity of that "opposing sides" visual is broken up. Be on the same side, cheering each other on.

WORK/HOME/PLAY

Let's say your character is the witty detective. Or the cranky surgeon. Or the socially awkward inventor. You're the best at what you do, and you've always got great one-liners.

You're also always predictable and, ultimately, a drag. A character who hits the same note in every interaction lacks depth. They're not truly interesting until they go up against someone who challenges the norm. The one criminal who outwits the detective. The one patient the surgeon is always kind to. The one friend the inventor can always talk to. But why stop at just one? A multifaceted character will have different relationship dynamics with everyone they know.

There are three basic realms where you might see a character: at work, at home, and at play. Your witty detective has a different relationship dynamic with the police chief than with their parents or their bridge buddy. These differences produce a wider variety of scenes.

In this exercise you discover how the same character might react in a variety of relationships. This is also a good exercise to practice status, which we explore more in the next chapter.

- **Player A and Player B have a short scene, in a relationship that's either work, home, or play. Suggest a relationship (page 166) to get started, or pick a location (page 163) and discover the relationship in the scene.**
- **After 30 seconds or so, someone else (Player C) yells "Freeze!" Players A and B immediately pause their scene. Player B leaves, and Player C enters.**
- **Player C starts a new scene in a new setting with Player A. Players A and C will have a different relationship dynamic from A and B. You can grab another suggestion, but the players may already have some good ideas.**
- **Continue introducing new relationships for Player A in different work, home, or play settings. You can bring back pre-existing characters, or make new ones.**
- **Run through additional rounds with someone else being Player A, as desired.**

EXPANSION!

Try "Relationship Chain," in which Player A and B start a scene, then Player C calls "Freeze!" Player C then starts a new scene with Player B, who stays the same character. Player D then calls "Freeze!" and has a scene with Player C. Continue until everyone has gone; in the final scene Player A returns as their starting character.

✦ TIPS! ✦

You might want to start by brainstorming types of relationships as a group and what type (work, home, or play) they'd fall into. Different relationships in the same realm will have varying power dynamics—someone's relationship with their boss will be different from that with their coworker, or their spouse versus their mail carrier, or their best friend versus their gym trainer.

Also, these scenes don't have to have any linear arc or narrative; we just want to see how one character behaves in different relationships.

BASE OBJECTIVES ON RELATIONSHIPS

A tip from Alex Dodge

In gaming, we often think of "objectives" as something we're trying to do to the world: to find treasure, or to survive the night. But in improv, I've learned that the most fun objectives are rooted in relationships, in how you want to affect others or how you want them to see you. Character- and relationship-based objectives like "to impress a friend" or "to draw out their secret" can help deepen bonds and drive the story.

STATUS

We often talk about character **status**. Status can mean many things—how confident you are, how you treat others, and how others treat you. It's less about your social status and more about your behavior.

When we rate our characters with numbers and discuss actions in terms of successes and failures, it's hard not to get sucked into the desire to "win." To combat this, we may rephrase "failure" as a "complication." A game might reward the player with a bonus when their character does something against their best interest. Or a game's entire premise may be telling the story of doomed characters.

Similarly, improv celebrates characters who get into trouble. If you're risk-averse and want to maintain your character's high status, you may find yourself sticking with safer choices rather than interesting ones. When you're low status, you've got nothing to lose—and that's when you start making very interesting choices. We encourage you to take risks, make bold choices, and accept the outcome with gusto.

Many challenges in roleplaying result in one character triumphing over another. Traditionally the GM plays all adversarial characters, so when a player's character defeats one of them, there's no hard feelings, right? But it can be more difficult when the conflicts are player versus player, and neither person wants to back down. Here again, we can turn to improv and to the magic that is playing with status.

We talked in ***Yes, And*** (page 32) about the perils of no-prov and why blocking your scene partner's accusations stalls out the plot. A trick to playing your way out of an argument is to not just admit what you did, but to feel shame, remorse, or otherwise yield your status to your scene partner. Grovel at their feet. Beg for their forgiveness. Offer them a bribe. Shifting the power dynamic breaks the cycle of arguing and allows the plot to continue.

Status can change throughout a scene as part of the natural give-and-take when building your story. In this chapter, you play around with characters of different status levels and explore what happens when those characters change in status.

ENCOURAGEMENT BALL

A character's failure doesn't have to be a letdown for the player—it can also be a choice. The mindset of "Yes, and" is about celebrating all choices, be they wins or losses in the narrative.

Just as we should be comfortable getting our own character in trouble, we should try not to be overprotective of another player's character. They might be really excited about something that would be just awful for their character, and we should embrace their choice. To practice celebrating losses, in this quick exercise (which is also great as a warmer), you encourage your fellow players no matter what.

- **Everyone gathers in a wide circle.**
- **Player A winds up and throws an invisible ball to Player B. Call out their name and make eye contact so Player B knows you're throwing to them!**
- **Everyone in the group cheers Player B on and shouts encouraging things to them.**
- **Player B fails to catch the ball.**
- **Everyone shouts even more encouragement to Player B, who brushes off the failed catch.**
- **Player B picks up the invisible ball and gets ready to throw to Player C, who also fails to catch it. Everyone shifts their shouts of encouragement to Player C.**
- **Continue until everyone has caught and thrown the ball at least once.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

This exercise isn't about physical comedy, so please don't hurt yourself with a pratfall. Let's also leave the old "hit in the crotch" joke out. The goal is not to have the most unique way of dropping the ball, just that you tried but didn't catch it, and everyone still cheered for you.

ANIMAL SECRETS

Characters who are constantly high status get boring real quick because they're not relatable; seeing a character's vulnerabilities makes them more sympathetic. Your character's weakness may, in fact, be a defining feature on their character sheet, and you can return to this weakness as a touchstone if you're ever unsure what move to make next.

You can also use your character's weakness to get them into trouble. For example, your character may be a goofy high schooler but they will never back down if someone calls them a coward. With the weakness known, both the players and GM can drive the plot toward that pivotal moment when the character is challenged and must decide what to do about it.

Similarly, you can poke at your character's weakness to add a little comedy to a scene. Your rugged adventurer may hate snakes, but that's not going to stop her from exploring the cavern—she's just not going to like doing it. Note that if you're pushing another character's buttons, be sure the *player* is on board. Don't be the griefer who enjoys ruining other people's fun—collaborate to get characters in trouble in a way that's both interesting and exciting for everyone.

Vulnerabilities can stem from a detailed backstory or be as simple as something personal that the character is afraid of admitting. This exercise is a silly way to explore a character's deepest secrets.

- **Someone suggests an animal that everyone is likely familiar with (for example, a zebra over a zebu).**
- **One by one in random order, each player voices a secret as if they were that animal.**
- **After each secret, everyone whispers "Secrets..." and fans out their hands, palms down, wiggling their fingers as if playing the piano.**
- **When the group reaches a natural pause, the round ends.**
- **Repeat for a few rounds, each with someone else suggesting a new animal.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

These secrets aren't connected, and you're not all describing the same individual animal. The secrets can be big or small, funny or serious. It could be related to that animal—for a zebra you could say, "I don't like stripes." Or it could be a secret that's just funny to hear if an anthropomorphized animal were saying it—you might also say, "Whenever I rake my lawn, I just dump the leaves over the neighbor's fence."

STATUS HEIGHTENING

As we said earlier, status is less about your social rank and more about behavior—how you treat others and how others treat you.

If you often play characters who are low status, you may find high-status characters to be challenging at first, or vice versa. Trying on characters of different status will help you become a more well-rounded gamer and improviser. It also trains you to shift gears as a character, which we practice more in "Status Shifts" (page 104).

This exercise is a good introduction to status to show the differences by exploring the extremes of both sides and the subtleties in-between. It's also a good exercise to practice heightening a character. Heightening isn't just about being bigger and louder; but intensifying what's already there.

- **Players split into two groups: A and B.**
- **Both groups move around the space at a casual pace, making gentle eye contact with each other.**
- **After 30 seconds, the facilitator gives instructions to heighten each group's behavior. The players should spend 30-45 seconds at each heightened round.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Be sure to debrief after this exercise; going to both status extremes can be quite an experience! Ask what came up for folks, what they found challenging, and check in to make sure everyone's in a good space to move on. Take a break if necessary, or do a more focused "shake out" by taking some extra time to have everyone move their body, and imagine that character as water that they're shaking off.

- **Round 1:**
  Group A: Move 20% slower, with intention.
  Group B: Move 20% faster, with starts and stops.
- **Round 2:**
  Group A: Carry yourself taller, leading with your chest.
  Group B: Make yourself smaller, hide your face.
- **Round 3:**
  Group A: Make eye contact with everyone, hold it for as long as you want.
  Group B: Avoid eye contact. If you make eye contact, apologize.
- **Round 4:**
  Groups A and B: Exaggerate these behaviors.
- **Round 5:**
  Group A: When you pass someone, put your hand on their shoulder and say they're doing a good job.
  Group B: If an A talks to you, say thank you, be grateful, and apologize for bothering them.
- **Shake off these characters, and switch roles. Group A now heightens their low status, and Group B heightens their high status.**

EXPANSION!

Now that you have a good idea of the extremes of high and low status, you can treat it as a scale of 1–10, with 1 being lowest status and 10 being highest. Then try out "Hi, How Are You?" (page 67) with assigned status levels. In it, everyone moves around and greets each other with the line "Hi, how are you?" to practice how having a different status affects how you say hello.

When changing status, what happens to your posture? Your eye contact? How big or little do your steps become? What do you do with your hands? Additionally, the differences between a 1 and a 10 may be obvious, but what about the subtle difference between a six and a seven? Play around with mannerisms both small and large.

HIDDEN ROYALTY

By Ash Cheshire

Status is a crucial aspect of character interactions. It can be easy to slip into using it antagonistically or uncomfortably with other characters, making both improv and roleplaying less fun. For example, while playing a high-status character such as a boss or a king, there can be a temptation to talk down to characters to emphasize your character's higher status. On the other hand, playing a low-status character can lead to deferring all decisions and opinions to other higher-status characters, which can make playing the character feel boring and dissatisfying.

There are other ways to play status differences, but they take some practice. This game is intended to create that opportunity, and to give you a space to talk about these dynamics openly with the other players afterwards so that you can find ways to play status that feel good to you and the people you're playing with.

- **Sort out cards of a single suit from a standard playing deck in descending order starting from the King, pulling a card for every player. (For example, five players would need a King, Queen, Jack, Ten, Nine.)**
- **Shuffle the cards and deal one face-down to each player. Do not look at your card.**
- **Everyone plays characters in a traditional and very polite royal court. In this royal court, etiquette is of the utmost importance, but so is status. You must be kind and polite to everyone while also trying to hint at others' status. (If there are number cards in the mix, these are non-royal court members, the number indicating how important to the royals they are, so the 10 is the most important non-royal, 9 below them, and so on.)**
- **Present your card in a way that is visible to others but not to you.**
- **Talk to other players, respecting the status indicated by their card, but without telling them their role or status directly. (For example, treat the King and Queen players with extreme respect but avoid phrases like "your highness" as well as actual titles.)**

- **After a few minutes of interaction, ask if everyone has some idea of what their card is. If anyone is unsure, allow more time for in-character conversation.**
- **Don't look at your cards yet. Organize yourselves in order of your cards, from lowest to highest. (You can move into a line or speak up in order prompted with "Who thinks they were the Jack? Who thinks they were the Queen?")**
- **After everyone's ready, reveal your card and see if you were right.**
- **As a group, discuss what led the players' assumptions about their status and role. How did you indicate others' status to them without hinting or telling them their card? How did you feel playing this game? What was it like not knowing your status in the group? What were your expectations going into this game? What surprised you?**

EXPANSION!

After your group has played this game as a royal court, try playing the game in other settings, such as high school prom, coworkers in an office, or the director, cast, and crew of a show.

✦ TIPS! ✦

Warm players up before the game by discussing status and brainstorm general ideas about how the roles might indicate status without giving the other player's card away. Especially if you're playing a variation, make sure to define the character roles of each card (for example, the King is the boss in a coworker scenario).

DEATH IN SIXTY SECONDS

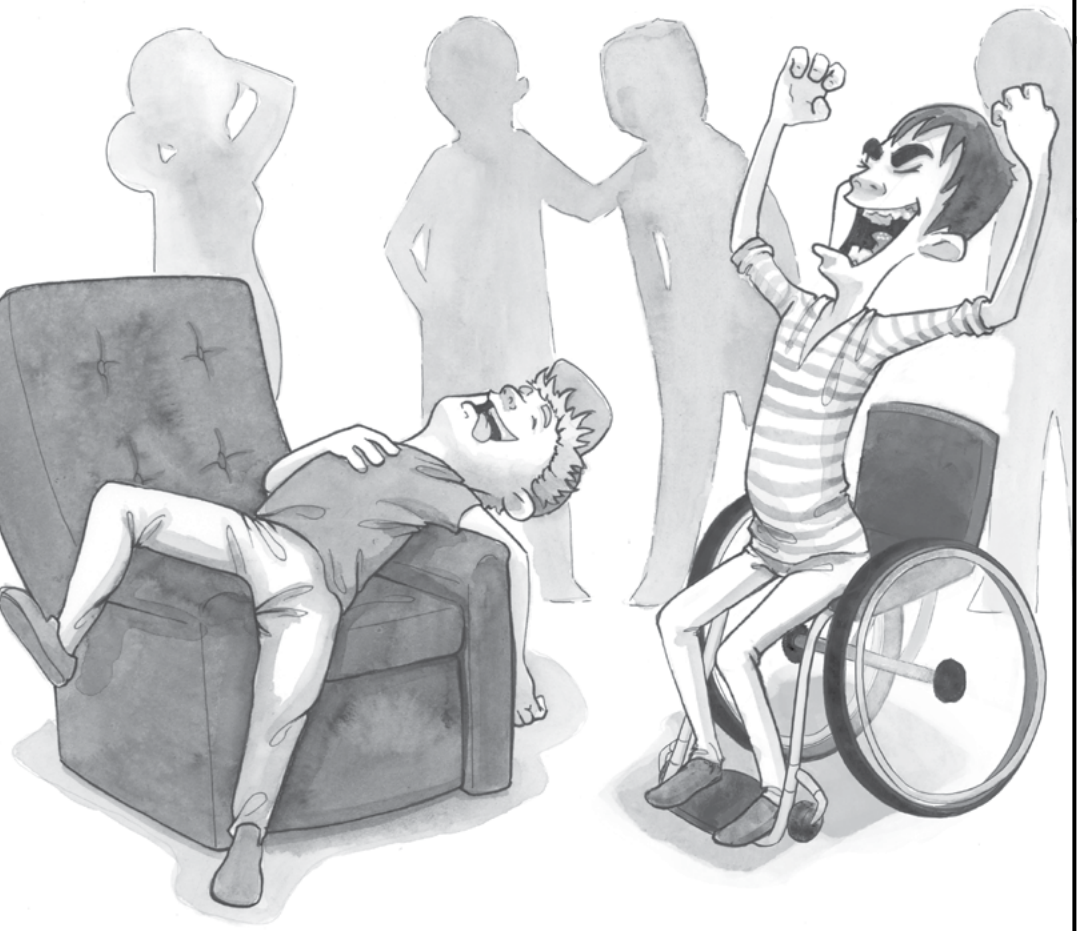
Sometimes, it's just not your character's day. Something bad will happen—you know this as a player, it's just a matter of deciding what and when.

This exercise plays with in-game negotiation. The group agreement is that someone at the end of the scene will "lose" and someone else will "win." Similar to "Throwing Swords" (page 16), either role can be a lot of fun. But you won't know who is who in advance—you have to discover it in the scene. This means listening very carefully to your partner's offers and working together. If they start pushing in one direction before you can add your own idea, it's time to "Yes, and" their offer and embrace the outcome, win or lose.

- **Two players start a scene that will last for exactly 60 seconds. The facilitator can give them a relationship or a location to help start the scene. Before the end of the scene, one of the players will die. It can be accidental or intentional. Embrace your doom!**
- **The facilitator calls out when the players have 15 seconds left, 5 seconds left, and when the time is up.**
- **Repeat the exercise as many times as there are pairs of people.**

STAGE COMBAT SAFETY

This exercise often gets physical—it may come to blows as a small disagreement spirals out of control or someone may fall out of their chair as they discover their tea was poisoned. Remember that this isn't carefully choreographed stage combat and we don't want anyone getting hurt. Check out our advice in *Appendix A: Safety Techniques* (page 150) to make sure that everybody knows how best to act out physical interactions.



STATUS SHIFTS

If you've already tried out "Work/Home/Play" (page 90), you saw how status is inexorably linked to relationships. The more fluid you are willing to be with your status, the greater variety of relationships you can develop.

Expanding on the idea of "Status Heightening" (page 98), you explore ways to express status other than physically in this exercise. You might express high status by building yourself up or putting others down—or vice versa for low status, always criticizing yourself and idolizing others.

This exercise also expands on "Hidden Royalty" (page 100) in that you can mix and match your perceived status and your actual status. Your obsequious minion may be the one calling the shots through flattery and guile. Likewise, your brash and assertive CEO may wield a lot of power with a pen but constantly asks others for guidance.

Additionally, a person's status can change mid-scene. Just as combat rounds have highs and lows depending on what you roll, some roleplaying games have rules for social interactions, showing changes in status through various rounds of a high-stakes conversation. If you're trying to convince your roommate that you two should co-adopt a dog, your status may shift as you make headway or meet resistance. This give and take is what makes a scene interesting.

- **Two players pair up for a scene. The facilitator assigns each player a starting status number of 1 (low) to 10 (high), and can give them a starting relationship (page 166) or location (page 163).**
- **During the scene, the facilitator gives a new status number for each player.**
- **The players change their tone, posture, emotion, or in-character decisions to reflect their new status. Don't worry about having the most interesting scene—the objective is to experience the fickle nature of status.**
- **The facilitator continues to assign new numbers, and the players respond appropriately.**
- **After 2–3 minutes, the facilitator ends the scene.**
- **Repeat the exercise with different players as desired.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Facilitator, calling out status numbers does mean you'll be interrupting the players; be sure to say each player's name (or their character's name), so they know whose number you're changing. You can change both players' status at the same time or switch off. You can jump around the scale or make subtle changes.

You can also pass off the responsibility of assigning status to two players not in the scene. Each directs one player's status throughout the scene.

Whoever is calling out the numbers should be mindful not to be a puppeteer by directing too forcefully or rapidly. The players have many challenges in these scenes—they're listening to their partner, keeping an ear out for when you change their status, and maintaining the flexibility required to adjust as needed. Be kind, and avoid making a game of it at their expense.

CHOOSE A STATUS THEY WON'T EXPECT

A tip from Jason Morningstar

Status play works great in tabletop games. Surprise your players by making a deferential monarch, an imperious servant, or a character who vacillates between extremes. Players often assume they will be met with either stern resistance or complete acquiescence, and it is easy to guess which they will expect based on archetypes, tropes, and your own build-up. Occasionally give them the opposite!

SPACE OBJECTS

Often improvisers don't have props to use in their scene. This brings more challenges—believably interacting with invisible objects, remembering where they are, and correctly interpreting what your partner is doing—and can lead to lots of inadvertently dropped offers. You may be miming peeling a banana, and your partner enters the scene to say, "Good job skinning that rabbit!" You and your partner may build a campfire at the start of the scene, getting down all the lovely details of kindling and spindle, and later you forget its location and cross the stage—right through your roaring fire.

In improv, we call these mimed objects **space objects** because we're handling and interacting with empty space as if it had weight and dimensions. As improvisers, you aren't expected to be trained mimes, but a little bit of miming can go a long way in selling the audience on what you're doing and in feeling more connected to the scene yourself.

Playing with an object is also a great way to give yourself some time to settle into your character or just to have something to do while talking. You can also explore what it's like to be holding something you want to put down but, for whatever reason, can't. You can cross the stage, pick up an object, and decide at that moment what it is and why it's important to you.

Larps may or may not have real props, and what props are provided may not pass as the genuine article. It's on you to sell that squirt gun as a real laser pistol or believably administer first aid on the battlefield without an actual medkit. Even at the table, you can add a little bit of physical roleplay by embodying your character's small mannerisms—adjusting your professorial glasses, raising your goblet to toast at a banquet, or gesticulating while holding your fine imported cigar. These little gestures are immediately engaging and activate our imaginations by allowing us to see and feel the action.

COMPARING OBJECTS

Depending on your style of larp, all your props may be real. Or you may have just a few real props and cards representing other objects. This makes it tricky to suspend disbelief when you're switching back and forth between the tangible and the invisible. Or you might not have anything, just the expectation that you'll improvise as needed.

Improvisers rarely work with tangible objects aside from a set of chairs on the stage. The rest is entirely mimed. Working with space objects can be tricky—that's okay! It's a fun layer to add to a scene but isn't required. But the more that you can visualize an object, the better you can sell to the audience that you are holding that cup of coffee, digging that shallow grave, or driving that taxi cab.

This exercise starts with the basics—holding an object. You practice creating various items and giving them dimensions and details to solidify them in your minds.

- **Everyone works in pairs.**
- **The facilitator calls out a random object (use the table for suggestions, or come up with your own).**
- **The players mime picking up and holding that object. Compare with your partner how you imagined your object. (If you're each holding a book, what type of book is yours? Is it paperback or hardcover? Is it leather-bound? Dog-eared? Is it a steamy romance novel or a sacred tome? Point out the object's various features and describe them to your partner.)**
- **The players practice interacting with their object, comparing against how their partner handles theirs. (How do you hold your book while you turn the pages—from the side or the bottom? How heavy is it?)**
- **After about 60 seconds, the facilitator can call out another object.**
- **Continue the exercise for about three or four objects total.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Holding your thumb to your ear and pinky to your mouth isn't talking on a phone. Pointing your finger at someone isn't aiming a gun. You must create an empty space in your hand where the object would go and keep your hands firm as if you're gripping the object. This will help you maintain its dimensions throughout the scene. It will also keep you from accidentally relaxing your hands, getting caught up in the dialogue, and then forgetting what you were holding—from the audience's perspective; you just dropped your book!

If you set an object down, imagine a magnet at the bottom connecting with a magnet in the table. When picking it up, do so with a little tug to separate the magnets. These exaggerations help define the object's weight.

1	Action figure	11	Laptop
2	Amulet	12	Laser gun
3	Bag of money	13	Magic potion
4	Bio-scanner	14	Magic wand
5	Book	15	Mask
6	Coffee mug	16	Phone
7	Deck of cards	17	Potted plant
8	Glass of water (with or without straw)	18	Sword
9	Hat	19	Tea cup
10	Jewelry box	20	Watch

RED BALL

The skill of listening in improv isn't just about paying attention to what people are saying. We also pay attention to what we observe—how our scene partner is portraying their character physically, the emotions they're expressing, and the space object work they're doing. These types of physical cues are just as important as what a player may be saying.

In tandem with that, we help our fellow improvisers out by clearly communicating these types of cues. We want our physicality to be obvious, our emotions recognizable, and our space objects well-defined. We can use these same skills at the table to add a bit more in-character roleplay or in larping to truly embody our character and envision imaginary objects.

This exercise plays with space objects specifically and how clear communication is just as important as active listening.

- **Player A passes an invisible red ball by saying "Red ball?" to Player B, and mimes holding a ball.**
- **Player B receives the ball by repeating what it is ("Red ball!") and mimes holding the ball. They should make sure to match the approximate size of the ball that Player A gave them.**
- **As players continue to pass around the red ball, start introducing new objects to pass at the same time, and their corresponding gestures:**
  - **Red bull: Hold a can and open the pop tab**
  - **Red bowl: Cradle a bowl with both hands**
  - **Bread bowl: Hold a bowl and stir the contents with a spoon**
  - **Lead ball: Roll a heavy ball across the floor**
  - **Red shawl: Wrap a shawl around your shoulders**
  - **Thread ball: Hold a ball of thread and pull a string from it**
  - **Make up your own, that either sounds similar or is completely different!**

✦ TIPS! ✦

To reduce the amount of overlapping speakers, don't pass multiple objects around. Instead, players can receive one item and either pass that same item or switch to another. This keeps everyone on their toes, because the object could change at any time!

GIVING A PRESENT

Opening a scene with a controlling offer like "And here we are at the circus for your thirteenth birthday, Greta, my dearest daughter," might sound silly and unnatural. Conversely, an open offer like "So, what do you want to do first?" gives your partner very little to go on unless you've already established where you are and how you know each other. With the latter, you might intend to start at the circus with your kid, but if your partner responds with "Let's throw rocks at the principal's car! I'm so glad school is finally out!" then it's your responsibility as a good scene partner to adjust to the truth that has just been established.

In this exercise, you work with space objects while going back to the basics of "Yes, and" by literally receiving the gift of information and justifying it with grounding details. You also explore giving a lot or a little information in your offer and justifying with either a positive or negative emotion.

- **Players work in pairs.**
- **Player A gives Player B an invisible box with a present inside. Player A communicates the size and shape of the box through space object work and telegraphing. Both players should be very excited about giving or receiving a present.**
- **As Player B opens the box, Player A announces what the gift is. Player B takes out the object and justifies why it is the perfect gift.**
- **Players switch roles; Player B now gives a gift to Player A. It can be a fresh scene or a follow-up to the previous one.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

The present isn't the only space object in the scene; don't forget about the box! Perhaps it's wrapped with a ribbon. Do you use scissors to open it? Where do you put the box after? Are there packing peanuts inside? Have fun with all the little details.

EXPANSION!

See how it feels when you switch from controlling offers to open offers: first, Player A only gives vague hints about what the gift is. (For example, they could say, "I think you're going to like this..." or "This is a little unconventional, but..." or "Be careful when opening it, watch your fingers!") When Player B opens the box, *they*, not Player A, announce what is inside.

Additionally, Player B can decide how they feel about the gift. Compare against the original exercise—did this expansion feel any different? Was it easier when you knew what the gift was and how to react, or did you enjoy filling in the blanks yourself?

QUESTIONS

A question is a tricky offer to give your partner—often, it's not really an offer at all. As Charna Halpern says, "He who gives information is a gift-giver; he who asks questions is a thief." Starting a scene with, "What are you doing?" puts the onus back on your partner to establish the facts of the scene. A good habit to get into is to answer your own questions. "You're sneaking out to see Trivia again, aren't you?" is an offer disguised as a question.

"Play to find out" games, broadly, are games in which the GM doesn't have a strictly plotted adventure and instead gives the players more agency to shape the story. The GM in this role is largely reactionary, improvising responses to the player's choices. But just as in improv, scenes in a game require give and take from both sides. Starting a game session with "So, you're all in class... what do you do?" may be an easy question for some to answer, but others might find it intimidating, especially if they're used to more structured play. Consider throwing in some details, not just for color but also to give your players a bit more to react to. "So, you're in English class, and Mr. Kilgannon has given you 20 minutes of silent, sustained reading. You hear Cris to your right whisper, 'Pssst, want to make an easy fifty bucks?' Do you respond to her or keep reading?"

For more about loaded questions from a GM's perspective, check out "Tabletop Jazz" (page 86).

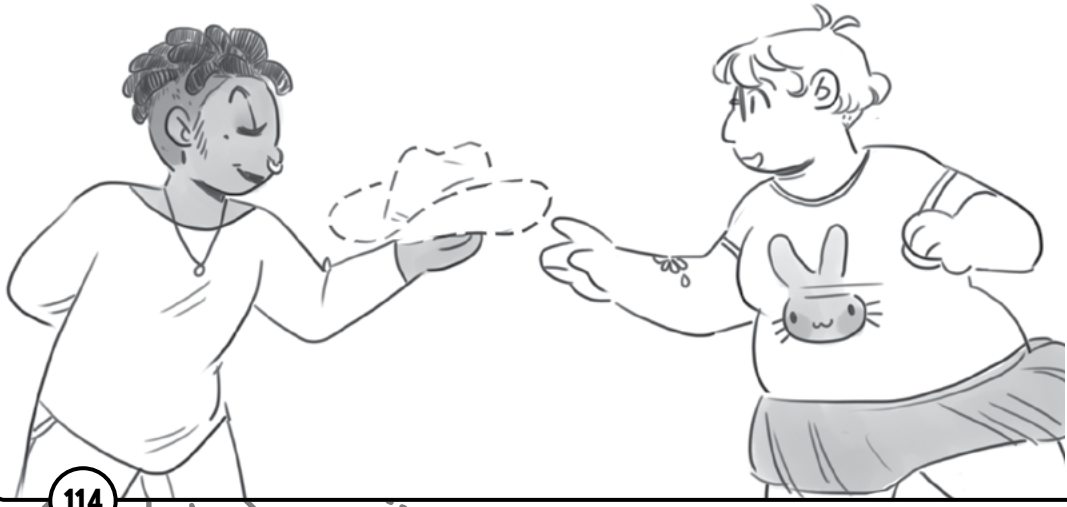
DON'T FORGET THE DOO RAG

By Erica Riddick

The superpower of improv is how it explores the everyday in different settings among different characters. In an effort to practice and normalize wider diversity in improv scenes, this exercise focuses on introducing an object and a sense of urgency that implies need and consequence, which is always fun. Equally beneficial for improv and gaming. Players will introduce an object and then alternate adding one element to the scene that expands the object relative to the five Ws (WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and WHY).

As a bonus, introducing an object is a gift that keeps on giving through offering something to "hold," introducing both physicality and architecture (adding to your scene's environment), and you never know where or when it may reappear and become useful or critical.

The item can be something simple, small, and seemingly mundane like a box of brown Band-Aids, something that alludes to a specific cultural setting like a yarmulke, or something completely unique or made-up like a "shulmot." Introducing diversity of objects is a low-stakes way to explore how different characters relate to different realities.



- **Players work in pairs, either in different spaces simultaneously or one pair at a time with the rest as the audience.**
- **Player A reminds Player B to not forget an item. ("Don't forget the doo rag!")**
- **Player B replies to Player A with a WHO. (If they respond "Thanks, I really need to look good tomorrow," the WHO of the object is Player B.) Having the object doesn't necessarily mean that it belongs to you, but you do have a relationship with it.**
- **Player A offers a WHAT. ("I'm really excited for you, I know you're going to do so well in the interview" indicates that the WHAT of the object is related to a new job.)**
- **Player B adds a WHEN. ("I appreciate how you're always looking out for me, I already put it in the bag with the other stuff for the party tonight" indicates that the WHEN of the object is tonight.)**
- **Player A adds a WHERE. ("Yeah, I can't believe the luck that your potential boss will be at Mom's birthday party in your childhood home!" indicates that the WHERE of the object is Player B's childhood home.)**
- **After players have done a quick initial load of the five Ws, you can explore the consequences of forgetting the object and what role the object may have in the relationship between the players.**

EXPANSION!

Change focus from an object to other neglected areas and subjects, such as body ability, cultural background and intersection, sexual or gender identity, or religious background.

You can also create a short scene of about 10 lines or so, then replay the scene with different emotions. This will foster immediate repetitive exploration through a specific lens that can help when practicing a new skill.

YES, LET'S!

If you're setting a larp scene in a kitchen, an easy way to get started is to imagine it as your kitchen. Where is your fridge? Where are the knives? Where do you keep your cutting board? These objects don't materialize out of thin air, and neither should your space objects.

Unless you start a scene *in medias res*—for example, while you're chopping carrots—take your time enjoying your action while conversing with your partner, and even before and afterward. Go to the fridge, get the carrots (in a crisper drawer or on a shelf?), set them down on the counter (do you put a cutting board down first, or is it a butcher block?), get a knife (in a drawer or in a knife block on the counter?), and *then* start chopping. Do you put the peelings in the compost bin after? Do you wash the knife or leave it in the sink? These details will make the scene feel more natural than if you're chopping the same carrot forever.

In this exercise, you practice taking your time with the details as you move from one action to the next. It's also some good "Yes, and" practice to throw yourself wholeheartedly into an action.

- **Everyone casually moves around the space in different directions.**
- **The facilitator calls out a suggestion of what the group should do. (For example, "Let's all get ready for bed!")**
- **Everyone says, "Yes, let's!" and starts miming that sequence of actions. (Washing your face, brushing your teeth, and so on.)**
- **After 30 seconds or so, the facilitator gives a new suggestion. Everyone drops their current action, says "Yes, let's!" and dives into the new action.**
- **The facilitator can keep giving suggestions, but it's also fun for the players to come up with the ideas!**
- **Continue the exercise through a few different suggestions.**

MUNDANE	
1	Do a load of laundry
2	Do the dishes
3	Fix a flat tire
4	Get a glass of juice from the fridge
5	Get ready for bed
6	Go to the library
7	Make a pot of tea
8	Make a salad
9	Order coffee for the whole office
10	Play at the beach

OUT OF THE ORDINARY	
1	Clean a high-rise window
2	Craft a potion
3	Dock the spaceship
4	Fight a duel
5	Forge our own weapons
6	Milk a cow
7	Plant a tree
8	Set a trip wire
9	Shoe a horse
10	Write a poem

✦ TIPS! ✦

You can interact with other people and be in the same world, or you can be in your own space. You can be silent or, if imagining another person there, you can have a one-sided conversation. It will be a little chaotic, with lots of people talking and moving at once—that's okay! If you choose to interact with someone else, be sure to acknowledge what they're doing! If you're both at the beach, watch out that you don't accidentally walk through their sandcastle.

TOUCH THREE THINGS

We've talked about how the crux of a scene isn't the objects—it's the relationship between the players. Working with space objects gives you something to do during the scene and another way to express your character. When playing "Been Waiting Long?" (page 66), you explored how your character can influence your physicality and how you interact with your scene partner. If you're a deadly assassin, how would you chop carrots? Or go on a blind date? Or train a puppy?

However, it's important in any game to not get so caught up in what your character is doing that you forget about the others at the table. In this exercise, you practice paying attention to your partner while keeping track of all the different space objects in the scene. As always, the object is just a catalyst for something more interesting to happen.

- **The facilitator gives the two players a location (and a relationship, if desired) to start a short scene.**
- **The scene begins in silence. Each player silently interacts with three objects that might be found in their location before they speak their first line.**
- **The pair continues their scene for about 2–3 minutes.**
- **Repeat the exercise with new players, as desired.**

EXPANSION!

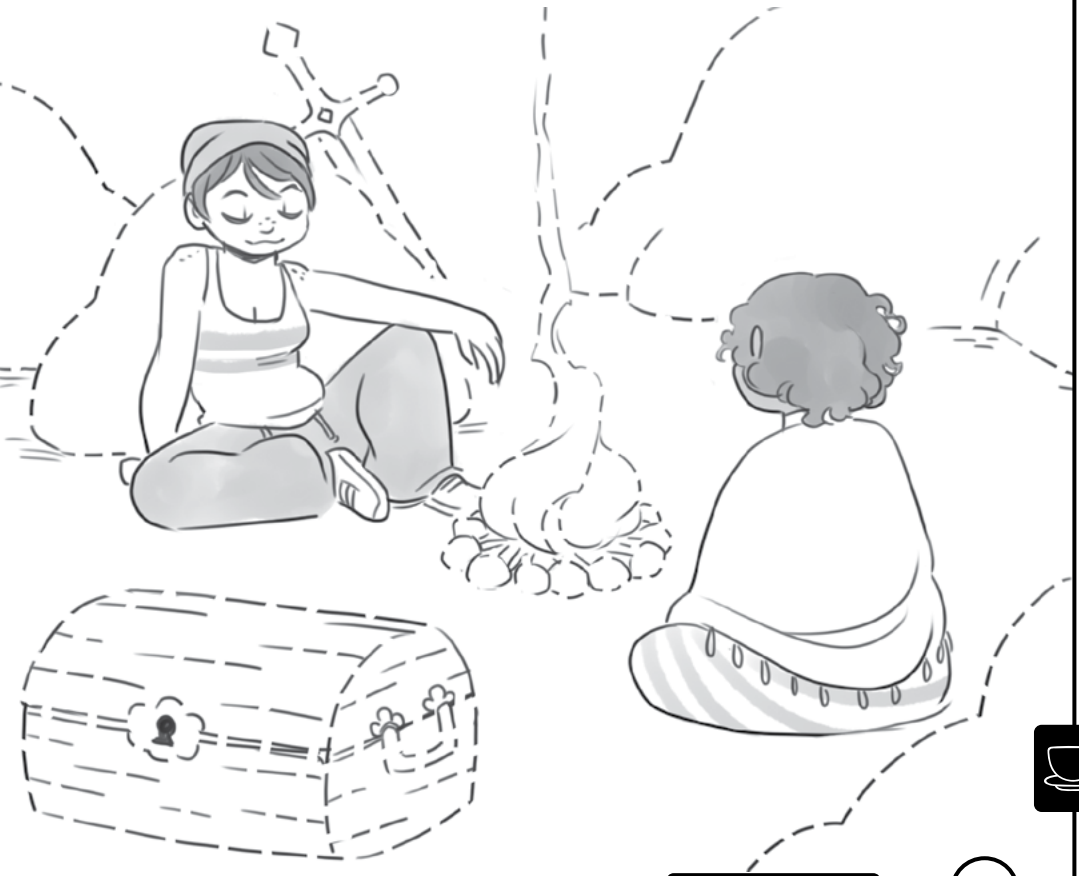
As a variation, start with the exercise "Tableau" (page 50) but with just two players rather than the whole group. The players take turns identifying items aloud until they've each named three. They then exit the space and re-enter to have a short scene in the setting they've created, interacting with some or all of those objects.

✦ TIPS! ✦

It's not a race to speak first, so take your time establishing what's there, and keep an eye out for what your partner is doing!

You may not always identify what objects your partner is interacting with, especially at the beginning of the scene. It might be helpful to later announce what your object is so your partner doesn't misinterpret it. You might say, "This antique clock belonged to my father" or, "I think I look pretty good in this top hat if I do say so myself," giving your partner something to respond to.

That being said, if the conversation is all about the object, then you're not focusing on the relationship. Consider why you're in this location, holding this object, and how it makes you feel. Or the objects could mean nothing at all—you're just making dinner together. How then does your partner make you feel, and how will you express that in your actions?



TIMING

In this chapter, we discuss how to have a balanced scene that's not too long and not too short, and direct multiple scenes happening simultaneously.

Often, improvisers talk about **editing** scenes. This is when someone ends the scene and starts a new one. (We also sometimes refer to "cutting" scenes, but because Cut and Brake are safety tools in larps, we'll stick with the term "edit.")

If your scene gets edited, but you had something else you wanted to say, don't worry. It's okay to be edited. There will be more scenes. We can come back to that character later if there's more to their story.

A good metaphor for editing is channel-surfing or scanning radio stations. You might be watching or listening to something cool, but you want to know what else is on. So you jump around. In this same way, GMs shift the spotlight around the table, ensuring that each character contributes something vital to the story.

Editing can be a challenging responsibility for a GM. However, there's nothing stopping players from editing themselves and indicating when their scene is over—especially if they just wanted to contribute one small element to the story.

COLOR AND ADVANCE

There's some good opportunity for comedy when you talk about *things* in a scene, but eventually, you'll lose the audience if there's not enough plot.

The same can be said for roleplaying games. The GM's description of your surroundings may hold clues, or it may just be added color. But there must always be a balance. There are only so many oubliettes and random tin cups your dungeon-crawling party is willing to investigate before getting frustrated that none of it unlocks the plot further. Conversely, saying simply that your character tries to walk across a bridge does little to paint the danger of the scene. You could note that the bridge is rickety, the gorge it spans is craggy and deep, the winds are whipping across the chasm, and your character's hands are sweating as they grip the rope railings.

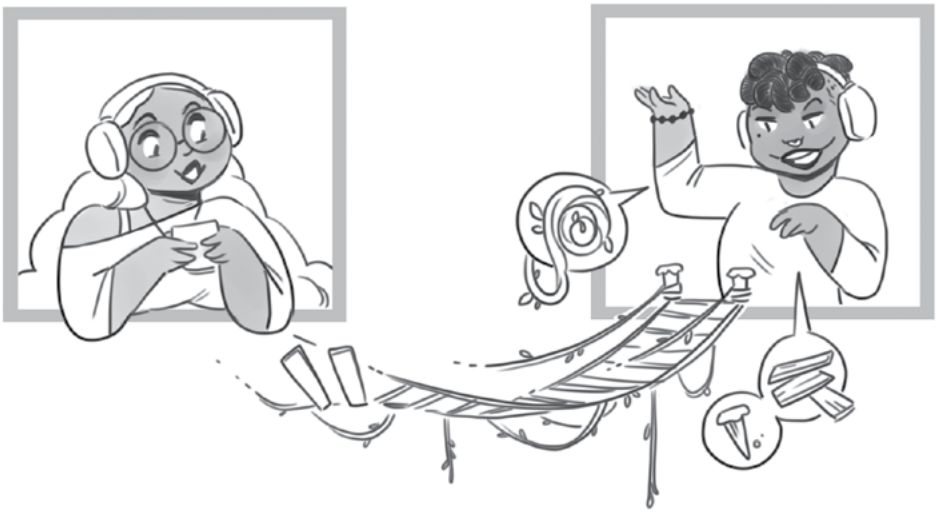
Sometimes a scene needs plot and sometimes we want to enjoy the setting. In this exercise, you experience the benefits of both sides and practice feeling out when a story needs one or the other.

✦ TIPS! ✦

This doesn't have to be the greatest story ever told, but it should have a plot thread. You can talk about everything you did yesterday, tell a completely fictional story, or blend a bit of both. If you're not sure what to say, borrow the plot of a book or movie you're familiar with and make it your own. It's not a race to the finish, so don't worry about how far you get.

Additionally, you don't have to ask your partner to switch between plot and description a lot, just whenever you're interested in one over the other. Your partner is doing a lot of work making this story up on the fly, so be their number-one fan, and don't turn this into a game of rapid-fire demands.

- Players work in pairs.
- Player A begins telling a short story.
- When desired, Player B interjects by saying "Color" and specifies what they want to hear more detail about. ("Color on that character" or "Color on the weather.")
- Player A pauses the plot and switches to describing more about that element in the story—what the characters are wearing, what the weather's like, what sounds and smells are around, and so on.
- When Player B has had their thirst for details sated, they say "Advance."
- Player A switches back to building the narrative.
- As the story progresses, Player B continues to switch between "Color" and "Advance" requests.
- Player A continues to tell their story for about 3 minutes. (The facilitator can call time.)
- The pair switches roles and the new Player A begins telling a new story.
- Players can switch partners and play multiple rounds, as desired.



HALF-LIFE

Sometimes scenes run long. That's okay! There's no magic number for how long a scene should be. Some improvisers may put on an entire show that's a "mono-scene," a single scene that stays in the same location. Sometimes a scene is just a short exchange of sentences—or one killer line.

In this exercise, you try out scenes of varying lengths to feel what it's like to say as much as you can in as few words as possible.

- **Two players have a scene of exactly 2 minutes, timed by the facilitator. The facilitator can give them a relationship or location to help them get started.**
- **After this scene finishes, discuss the highlights as a group. Who was the protagonist? What was the main point of drama or interest in the scene? What was something remarkable each player did that defined their character?**
- **In just 1 minute, the same players repeat the same scene to the best of their ability.**
- **Players repeat the scene in 30 seconds, 15 seconds, 7 seconds, 3 seconds, and finally 1 second—which should be nothing more than a single word or movement!**

✦ TIPS! ✦

This isn't a race to repeat the whole scene in less time, or a test on how much you remember. Just keep the same general plot, and try to bring back any good lines.

Afterward, talk about which version of the scene you all liked best. There's no right answer, though people will often prefer the slightly shorter scenes because you've established the basics of the story by then. Similarly in gaming, you've already got your character, relationships, and setting established before you dive into scenes.

CLAP CLAP, SNAP SNAP

It's not just up to the GM to edit scenes. Players must be mindful of how often they're in the spotlight, taking care of their fellow players, so everyone has a chance to shine.

Improv offers a variety of tools to transition between scenes. You'll practice one technique in this exercise, but we've listed a few more you can practice in "Montage" (page 146). Before learning *how* to edit a scene, it's important to know *when* to edit a scene.

It's often the responsibility of the improvisers offstage to edit the scene in progress. Doing so means giving your fellow players your full attention and waiting for a **beat**. A beat might be a punchline, a resolution to a conflict, or a natural pause in a conversation. It may sound difficult to master this instinct, but finding beats is just the result of careful observation.

Beats come and go. If you miss the chance to edit a scene at a beat, you'll be stuck waiting for the scene to reach another. And the longer you leave your fellow improvisers onstage, the more likely the scene will lose energy. So you may also choose to edit a scene because it's dragging or because the players onstage are floundering. You might also want to end on a cliffhanger. Or you could spare the audience from seeing something that they already know is coming, especially if it's pushing at people's comfort zones. The safety technique Lines and Veils, coined by Ron Edwards, was designed for tabletop RPGs and did something similar. You can designate a "fade to black" moment by saying that you "veil" a scene when ending it.

This exercise gives every player offstage the authority to edit a scene and gives some good practice on the give and take of letting your scene be edited.

- **Two players are onstage, while the rest of the group are in a line behind them.**
- **The two players start a scene. The facilitator can suggest a starting relationship or location, if needed.**
- **The players in the line watch the scene and wait for a beat. When someone in the line feels like the players in the scene have hit a beat, they start a rhythm of slapping their legs twice and snapping their fingers twice.**
- **As soon as someone starts to "clap clap, snap snap," the rest of the players in the line join in.**
- **When a scene is edited, the players onstage immediately rejoin the line.**
- **Two new players leave the line and start a new scene.**
- **Continue until everyone has been in a scene.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

You may want to edit because the scene just isn't working—help your fellow players out! It's also okay if someone edited the scene, but it didn't feel like a beat to you, or if you just wanted to see the scene continue a bit longer. Once one person has decided to edit the scene, everyone else should support that decision by joining in the rhythm.

When your scene gets edited, resist the temptation to finish what you were going to say! This exercise is about practicing finding a beat, not about having the most interesting or complete scene.

When starting a new scene, the facilitator could suggest a new location or relationship, or the players could start a scene based on their own inspirations. It doesn't have to be connected to the previous scene in any way.

SPLIT SCREEN

It's never good form to hog the spotlight. An assertive GM can prevent this by identifying a good place to end a scene, and players can prevent it by keeping a "Yes, and" mindset—in this case, by yielding the spotlight and giving their full support and attention to another player. As we've said, managing multiple scenes is like flipping through radio stations—the focus will come back to your character in due time.

The goal of this exercise is to practice editing scenes solo, managing multiple narratives, and getting comfortable passing the focus to someone else.

- **Two pairs of players engage in side-by-side scenes. Designate an imaginary line dividing the stage into halves, with a pair on each side if the space allows.**
- **Designate another player as the director. They can sit facing the two pairs.**
- **The facilitator gives Pair A and Pair B a starting suggestion, and Pair A starts the first scene.**
- **When Pair A reaches a beat (or another good reason to edit the scene), the director claps and points to Pair B. (They could also say "Cut to Pair B" or use some other method to interrupt the players.)**
- **Pair A freezes mid-scene, remaining frozen while Pair B starts their scene.**
- **When the director sees fit, they clap and point back to Pair A. Pair B freezes and Pair A resumes their scene. They can pick up where they left off or skip ahead in time.**
- **The two pairs continue to play out their scenes as the director switches back and forth.**
- **After a few minutes, the facilitator calls for the end of both scenes. Switch the roles of director and players, and repeat the exercise as needed.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

The two narratives are completely separate and don't have to relate to each other at all.

Director, you can change up the pace of switching between pairs but avoid going too fast or too slow. Going too fast can make the players feel frantic, and going too slow can mean passing over good beats.

Facilitator, if you have a large group, you can switch directors mid-scene by quietly tapping the director out and allowing someone else to take their place.

COFFEE SHOP

An editing technique often found in television and movies is when one scene cuts to another, and the dialogue in the new scene mirrors the dialogue from the previous scene. It's a clever way to smooth the transition from one scene to another. This technique of shifting the spotlight is also useful in gaming and improv—and can be achieved easily if everyone's in group mind.

As we mentioned on page 41, an improviser may get a hit to start a new scene. A hit isn't a full-formed story—it's the spark of an idea that you use to start your scene, and then you and your partner see where it goes.

This exercise taps into group mind by seamlessly shifting focus between scenes and practices finding a hit to start a new scene. You also work more on practicing give and take by claiming and yielding the spotlight.

- **Players all work in pairs. If the space allows, pairs should spread out and sit facing each other.**
- **The facilitator sets the location at a coffee shop.**
- **The facilitator can give each pair a starting relationship. Treat each pair as a separate scene, so nobody from one table in the coffee shop should start talking to someone at another table.**
- **The scene starts with everyone talking at once. These can be basic conversations—there's no need for high drama or conflict. After a moment, the players should naturally fall silent so that only one pair (Pair A) is speaking. Pairs shouldn't freeze in place; but continue silently, as if they've moved out of focus. Rather than miming words, do a quiet action, such as checking your phone, reading the menu, or holding (or breaking) eye contact with your partner.**
- **After a few moments, a different pair (Pair B) starts their conversation, interrupting Pair A.**
- **Pair A falls silent and yields the spotlight to Pair B.**
- **Continue for about 5 minutes, with all the pairs taking turns claiming and ceding the spotlight.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Listening to the other conversations is key. Firstly, you want to make sure there's variety in the scenes. If one pair is madly in love, you don't need to see another couple also madly in love. Secondly, keep an ear out for when another pair cuts in. They may have found a hit that would be a good transition to their scene, or they may have heard a good beat to edit your scene on. In both cases, your scene needs to pause immediately.

SCENEWORK

Once you've warmed up and practiced a few specific skills, you may be ready to dive into longer scenes. This is the meat and potatoes behind the question "What do you do?" that comes up so often in roleplaying games.

Of all the improv advice we've given in this book, here are three key points to keep in mind during scenework:

CUT TO THE ACTION. Try opening a scene with the second half of a conversation. ("And that's why I feel I deserve a raise." "You can pick up your things tomorrow from the porch!" "You want to scavenge in *Car Town*? You'll never make it there alive!" "There's just not enough air for three people; drawing straws is the fairest way.") Make your offers specific with foundational details.

MAKE YOUR PARTNER LOOK GOOD. Your partner is trusting you to build an amazing scene with them, not sell them out for a cheap laugh or make them look bad. Just as in gaming, griefers don't get invited back to game night, so don't be that person whose fun comes from ruining the fun of others.

PICK JUST ONE WEIRD THING. Avoid overloading a scene with many bizarre details. And if your partner's entire character concept is the "one weird thing," kill them with kindness. Treat them like a hero and a genius. Recycle their weird choices so they work for you. It can actually be fun and quite easy to play the "straight" person since all you have to do is react to the other person's choices.

EXPOSURE

This book includes several exercises about managing the spotlight, but what about just getting used to the spotlight? It can be hard to have the entire table's attention, whether you're a GM facilitating a 6-hour game or a player who has initiative.

This exercise may feel a little simple but explores a lot about what it means to be in the spotlight vs. in the audience and the dynamics between the two. It's a great warmer specifically before diving into scenework.

- **Divide the players into two lines facing each other, about 6–10 feet apart. One group is the audience (typically seated), the other group is the presenters.**
- **For 2 minutes, the audience and the presenters silently observe each other. It's not a staring contest; players can shift eye contact from one person to another in whatever way feels comfortable. It's okay to giggle if you feel nervous, but players should try to keep a neutral face.**
- **After 2 minutes, the facilitator advises the presenters to focus on a spot behind the audience for 1 minute. They can count the bricks, the panes of stained glass, the number of wood panels. They could even count to 100 by multiples of 4 or something else to occupy their thoughts. If they lose count, start over. If they finish counting, start over.**
- **Switch groups so both can experience being the audience and presenters.**
- **Discuss how each role felt: the audience observing the presenters, the presenters observing the audience, the presenters ignoring the audience, and the audience being ignored. How did it feel? Was one more comfortable than the other? When did you feel the most connected to the others?**

✦ TIPS! ✦

If playing online, the presenters should start by looking directly at the camera (SEND mode, as discussed on page 6), and the audience observes their video (RECEIVE mode). After 2 minutes, the presenters can look beyond their camera—at the wall, out the window, or just focus their thoughts on something else.

THE MOMENT OF CHANGE

By Marcus Sams

Every action we take in our lives is a result of the actions before it. A cause and effect that are connected. One domino strikes the next, causing the inertia that propels the following events into existence. As each domino falls, it undergoes a change of state. In one moment, the domino is standing tall, it falls, and then it finds itself in a new state. The instant in which one domino strikes another is the moment of change. As humans, this domino metaphor can be seen as the series of events that led us to where we are today. Think about the dominos, or life events, that had to fall or catalyze to bring you to reading this book right now. Along your life's journey, there were many dominos that pushed your personal narrative forward. Something in life may have shifted, you noticed the shift, and you reacted to the shift. Sometimes these shifts may be small and yet have the largest impacts on our lives, while other times, the shift may be simply noticing that a taxi cab's light went on. The key is in the noticing and then the taking of an action.

I began working with the concept of the moment of change as I was working on the curriculum for my improv classes. Using some borrowed inspiration from the Meisner Technique, I quickly fell in love with two pivotal questions:

Will we be aware enough to notice the Moment of Change when it occurs?

Will we be brave enough to take action when the Moment of Change occurs?

The first question demands our presence and connection to the other person or the material—the story, game, campaign, and so on. The second question requires us to trust in ourselves and to commit to the choices we make fully, ideally without judgment.

This quickly became the cornerstone of Moment Improv Theatre's approach to its organic long-form improv training center. In improv, we don't know where the story is going, nor do we want to, as that would rob us of the journey. As each action unfolds, if present, we have the

opportunity to take notice of whether or not something has changed. It could be a smile or the furrowed brow of a person we're speaking with. It could be the moment someone breaks eye contact or even someone relaxing their shoulders while on vacation in Mexico. The point is, when the moment of change occurs, that is the moment we get to make the decision to take action.

What is beautiful about this concept is that we can find its presence not only in improv but in our lives and in the stories we tell, real or imagined. Anything is everything when it comes to storytelling, and everything spawns from a moment of change. Discover the moments of change and act upon them. Each time a domino falls, it is almost certain that it will lead you somewhere.

FINDING THE MOMENT OF CHANGE

- **Players work in pairs (designate Player A and B).**
- **Before beginning the exercise, both players take a deep calming breath and identify where they're at emotionally. In order to notice a change, we must first know where we are at.**
- **Player A tells Player B a truthful story while maintaining eye contact.**
- **Player A continues to tell their story until they notice a change in Player B, then Player A stops.**
- **Player A comments on the change they observed in Player B. ("I noticed that you looked...")**
- **Player B starts telling a story based on a time they felt that emotion.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

It's not Player B's job to judge the perceived observation of Player A. The aim is to merely observe a change. The decision-making process of what to do after observing the change depends on the scenario.

THREE-LINE SCENES

This exercise can be considered a warmer before longer scenes and illustrates how we build scenes one line at a time. Planning where you want a scene to go is only going to make things awkward. Just as it's less fun when a GM lays down a railroaded plot, it's less fun to force a scene in a certain direction, or fight against someone else's railroading, than to let it develop organically.

- **Players form two lines. Designate one side as "A" and the other "B." (Or you can use another method to split players into groups and determine the order.)**
- **The two players at the front of each line have a scene of three lines total (Player A speaks, then Player B, then Player A).**
- **Once finished, they move to the end of the other line (A goes to the B line, B goes to the A line).**
- **Run through the exercise again, so everyone gets a turn being both A and B.**

♦ TIPS! ♦

A lot can be said in three lines, but it doesn't have to be funny, exciting, or even that interesting. Player A gives an offer, Player B reacts, and Player A reacts to the reaction. You want to make every word count, so avoid wasting a line with a question. The offer "Where were you?" is much stronger when rephrased as a statement with more information. "You were at the stadium again—don't lie to me!" This gives your partner a lot more to work with.

Also, beware of dropping offers. Instead of starting a back-and-forth of "No, I wasn't!" and "Yes, you were!" skip to the "Damn right I was! I need to practice marching band eight hours a day if we're going to make the regional finals!"

EXPANSION!

Before starting their three-line exchange, each player can adopt a certain voice, stance, or fact about their character.

Additionally, you could start each scene with the same opening line. Every scene will result in a different interpretation as players put their own spin on it.

You can also try five-line scenes, or "three-ish" lines, in which the facilitator edits the scene after a few lines but doesn't count it exactly.

Three-Line Drills

"Three-Line Scenes" is a great framework to practice hitting certain story elements fast. You can use these templates to drill certain skills, or as a way to start a longer scene.

When we refer to someone as "adding their Yes, and," we mean that they're adding their own line to the scene in a way that accepts the previous offer and builds on it.

Try out these different variations, or make your own!

LISTENING

A: *Makes a statement*

B: *Repeats A's statement, adds their "Yes, and"*

A: *Repeats B's statement, adds their "Yes, and"*

A: *Makes a statement*

B: *Responds with "That means..."*

A: *Responds with "That means..."*

JUSTIFYING

A: *Makes a statement*

B: *Responds with "Yes, because…"*

A: *Gives more details about the topic*

A: *Makes a statement*

B: *Responds with "That's perfect, because… then adds their "Yes, and"*

A: *Responds with "That's perfect, because…"*

A: *Makes a statement*

B: *Responds with "I know that, because..." then adds their "Yes, and"*

A: *Responds with "I know that, because..."*

NAMES, LOCATIONS, ACTIONS

A: *Gives B a name and establishes where they are*

B: *Names A, justifies why they're at that location*

A: *Adds more details to the location or why they're there*

A: *Starts the scene with a silent action*

B: *Observes the action, then enters, names A, and says "I see you're..."*

A: *Names B and explains why they're doing that action*

RELATIONSHIPS

A: *Opens with "There's something I have to tell you..." and reveals something*

B: *Responds with "That means..."*

A: *Responds with more details*

A: *Opens with "You make me feel… because you always..."*

B: *Responds with "I always... because..."*

A: *Responds with "Now I feel..."*

NEW CHOICE

We have lots of great tools in gaming to communicate when we want to switch up what's happening in the moment, so you might already be comfortable expressing that you want to change a detail when it comes up mid-game. But what about when you're on the receiving end of that request? If you played "Spot" on page 29, you practiced how to say no hear someone else say no, and move on without any issue. This exercise is another opportunity to practice hearing no, making a new choice, and moving on. This skill requires you to be open and flexible to change and quickly come up with new ideas. An additional challenge in this exercise is justifying the new choice and weaving it seamlessly into the story.

- **Two players have a short scene, around 3 minutes.**
- **The facilitator, at any time, can interrupt with "New choice!" and specify which player needs to backtrack what they just said.**
- **The selected player must change the last thing they said. For example, if they said, "I'm making a grilled cheese sandwich," they could say a different type of sandwich—or that they're making something else entirely!**
- **The scene continues as if they always said the new choice. The players justify their choice as needed to make sense in the story.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Conversation in a scene can move fast, so it might be helpful to specify what the new choice is for rather than just say "New choice." For example, you could say, "Jacky, new type of sandwich."

As the facilitator, it can be tempting to subject one player to a run of new choices. This can be hilarious when watching it live, because the improviser usually struggles to come up with three, four, or five new choices. But since this is just practice, and the point isn't to entertain an audience but to be flexible with our offers, it might be better to only make one or two new choices in a row. But if the players are up for it, feel free to challenge them!

EXPANSION!

If you want to share the facilitator's role and have everyone stay in character, provide an in-scene reason why someone would need to repeat themselves. Anyone can use the phrase to indicate that another player needs to make a new choice. It could be as simple as "Sorry, what was that?" If playing online, set the premise that all your characters are actually on a video call and use a phrase like "Sorry, you're breaking up. Say that again?"

BACKSTORY SCENES

Starting out with just one establishing fact can go a long way toward developing your character's backstory and their point of view. This can be something the character is passionate about (either positively or negatively), something about their past, or a sentence about their worldview—something they believe or value strongly.

If you're trying to answer the question "What would my character do?" but feel stalled out or lacking inspiration, try asking yourself one of these questions:

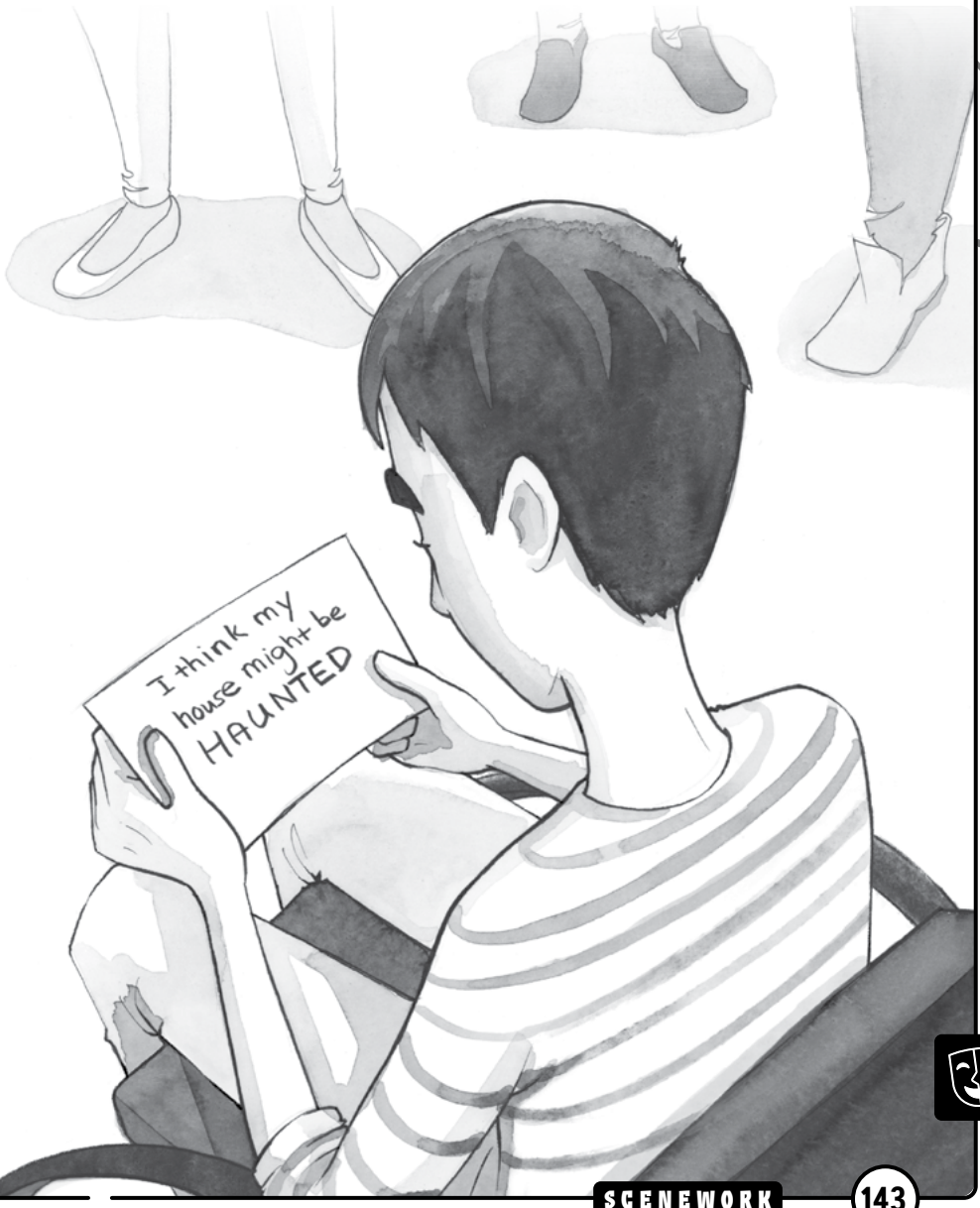
- **What is your biggest regret?**
- **What is your biggest goal?**
- **What are you afraid of most?**
- **What is one thing that you love (or hate)?**
- **Where do you draw the line?**
- **What is a secret you've been keeping?**

This exercise practices starting a scene with one of these questions already answered and seeing how that influences your choices. It also puts the "If that, then what?" idea (page 57) into practice.

- **The facilitator gives each player a fact about their character. You can use the point of view suggestions on page 161 or make your own.**
- **The facilitator can provide a location to start the scene.**
- **During the scene, players let their backstory influence their actions. ("If I used to be a prize-fighter, how do I react in a driving test?")**
- **After a few minutes, the facilitator edits the scene. Players then reveal to the group what their backstories were.**
- **Repeat the exercise for every pair of players or as desired.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

Your backstory can be obvious or subtle. Even if it never comes up in the scene, it helps you to have a foundation for your character to build on.



GROWING AND SHRINKING

Though it goes against our better judgment, sometimes it is practical to split the party. You may need to tackle different obstacles at once, or the GM may want to divide characters up to evenly portion out screen time. Scenes where everyone is together in the same room rarely have evenly distributed spotlight time—eventually one person will fall into a leadership role and direct the conversation.

This exercise explores how scenes change depending on how many people are in it and how best to frame a scene with a large group of people so that everyone still feels included.

- **The scene starts with one person onstage (Player A). Player A can be completely quiet in this scene if they wish, just doing an action or conveying an emotion.**
- **After a few moments, Player B enters and starts a new scene. Their first line should endow Player A as a different character and give other establishing offers. Player A responds accordingly, shedding their previous character and embracing the new scene.**
- **At some point, Player C enters and starts a third, new scene. Players A and B both drop their previous characters.**
- **Repeat until the whole group is onstage.**
- **After 30–60 seconds, the last player to enter (Player C, in this example) finds a reason to exit the scene.**
- **The remaining players onstage (Players A and B) revert back to the previous scene.**
- **One by one, players exit the stage in reverse order, reverting to previous scenes until only Player A remains in their original scene.**
- **The facilitator edits the final scene after Player A has had a few moments in their solo scene.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

For scenes with a large group, consider what types of groups make sense to see together—perhaps coworkers, classmates, a family, or a sports team. As discussed in "Classic Cast" (page 88), ensemble casts can often be found in a particular location such as a bar, a study room, a restaurant, or a hospital.

MONTAGE

A montage is a series of scenes that spiral off from a starting suggestion. They might all be tied into the same narrative, or they might be unrelated. There's no need to build a single plotline, and players don't have to return to previous characters.

However, if you were to stick with the same characters the whole time and follow their story, all you're missing is a rule for resolving actions to make it a roleplaying game!

If you've made it this far and are ready to form your own improv troupe, try doing a montage with a small group, maybe four to six people.

- **Players get a starting suggestion—it could be a word, short phrase, or a location—for the first pair onstage.**
- **Players take responsibility editing the scenes themselves (we discuss some techniques on the next page).**
- **One or two characters may become the protagonists, while other players come in and out as secondary characters. Alternatively, the scenes don't have to connect into a single narrative.**
- **After 10 minutes or so, the facilitator calls an end to the montage.**

✦ TIPS! ✦

This exercise is an opportunity to use anything and everything that you've practiced from earlier in the book. Have fun with dynamic, physical characters, various meaningful relationships, detailed invisible objects, and scene edits on satisfying beats!

EDITING TECHNIQUES

We've already discussed one editing technique in "Clap Clap, Snap Snap" (page 126). Here are two more methods that improvisers often use to edit scenes. Both of these rely on someone offstage editing the scene—perhaps the players onstage found a good beat, or maybe they need to be bailed out because the scene is dragging. These tools require players to take care of each other.

Swiping: Someone moves across the front of the stage, normally holding up one hand. This "swipes" the scene, as if drawing a curtain across it. This can also be called a wash, wipe, or sweep edit. The active players exit the stage to make way for a new scene. Often the person swiping the scene might have a hit to start the next scene—if they don't, someone else should run out so the stage isn't empty for too long!

Tag-outs: While Players A and B are having a scene, Player C enters the stage and taps Player A on the shoulder. Player A immediately leaves the stage, but Player B remains. Player B keeps playing the same character, but they're now in a new scene with Player C. Usually, Player C gives an opening offer to Player B as to where they are and how they know each other.

ZOOM IN ON THE DETAILS

A tip from Alex Dodge

As a GM, improv has helped me see more opportunities to spotlight my players. Gaming isn't nonstop acting—players move in and out of roleplay all the time, and it can be really fun to zoom in on something seemingly small and unimportant. I can ask players to respond to a prompt like "When you step away from the campfire, who follows you?" and then put them into that scene and have them play just that moment.

AZ GLOSSARY

BEAT

A punchline, resolution to a conflict, or a point where the conversation between scene partners has reached a natural pause. It's best to edit scenes when you reach a beat.

EDIT

To end a scene and start a new one. You might choose to edit when the players hit a beat, or the scene is dragging, or the players are floundering. You might also want to end on a cliffhanger. Or you could spare the audience from seeing something that they already know is coming, especially if it's pushing at people's comfort zones.

ENDOWING

Giving an offer that has a specific detail about your scene partner, such as a name, relationship, or characteristic. We often endow each other as a way to establish a scene while including foundational information.

GIVE AND TAKE

The concept of yielding the spotlight to others, or taking focus for yourself.

GROUP MIND

The moment when improvisers are so keyed in to the same idea, the scene falls perfectly into place.

HEAT

The nature of the relationship—how hot or cold it is.

HEIGHTENING

Turning up the dial on your partner's offer through physical exaggeration, emotional intensity, or raising the narrative stakes.

HIT

A small idea of how to start a scene. This isn't a full-formed idea, just the inkling of inspiration that can be communicated in an opening offer.

JUSTIFY

Explaining why a previously stated fact in the scene is true.

NEGATE

Denying the truth of something your scene partner said, or intentionally contradicting them.

OFFER

Any idea or fact that you establish as true during a scene. Ignoring or forgetting an idea your scene partner put forth is a "dropped offer." "Controlling offers" include specific information, while "open offers" leave the definition up to the recipient.

POINT OF VIEW

A character's view of the world and themselves, their likes and dislikes, their hopes and fears. Their "deal."

PRE-SCRIPTING

Planning in your head what you're going to say or which way the plot is going to go, as opposed to being in the moment.

SPACE OBJECT

An invisible object that you mime interacting with.

TELEGRAPHING

Being intentionally unambiguous, such as going into slow-motion to throw a punch or giving declarative statements about objects in the space or about what you are doing.

TOUCHSTONE

A fact, feeling, or mannerism your character has that you can unpack to discover more about them.

YES, AND

The mindset of accepting your scene partner's ideas and building on them with supporting facts.

WEIGHT

The way in which a line is delivered, influenced by the heat of the relationship.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: SAFETY TECHNIQUES

Safety, both physical and emotional, is as important in improv as it is in gaming. While you can modify them to whatever comfort level your group agrees to, we've included the basic community standards that we adhere to in our workshops.

PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES

There are no exercises in this book that require physical contact. However, players may be propelled in the moment to touch their scene partner—holding their hand, clapping them on the back, or perhaps sharing an embrace.

Before every workshop, we set expectations about the level of touch involved. Usually, we go with the ground rule that contact is limited to hands and arms. And if stage combat enters a scene—which can happen in some exercises!—it must be done in slow motion, with a barrier of an inch or two between the two combatants. This allows players to clearly telegraph their intentions, giving their partner time to react.

CONTENT CALIBRATION

In roleplaying, we have a variety of tools to negotiate boundaries, and it's a huge advantage to be able to pause at any time to adjust the game's content. When you're in front of an audience, you don't have that luxury, so it requires a lot of trust that your scene partners will take care of you—and that you'll do the same. With Improv for Gamers, we're exploring improv in a fun and low-pressure practice space, and given that we're doing so in the context of gaming, we can employ a mix of directorial tools from theater and safety techniques often used in larping. Feel free to use these tools with your group, or other preferred methods to establish a safe place to play.

BRAKE

If a player ever feels like a scene is getting a little too intense and wants to slow down, they can hold their hands in front of them, palms out, and say "brake." This lets their scene partner know to ease up a bit.

CUT

If a player ever feels uncomfortable, they can call "cut" to stop the scene. The scene doesn't resume until everyone is ready—in some cases you may need to rewind a scene to remove some information, or just end the scene and move to something new.

PAUSE

A player may call "pause" to temporarily halt the scene, perhaps to ask a clarifying out-of-character question. A facilitator may also call "pause" if the scene needs some course-correction.

SCENE

A facilitator may call the definitive end to a scene or exercise by saying "scene."

APPENDIX B: IMPROV WORDS OF WISDOM

Throughout this book, we shared several popular words of wisdom that we hear in improv. For your reference, you can find the details on the following pages:

Step into the fear 10

Dare to be dull 19

Choose a choice 25

Say "Yes, and" 32

Pick one weird thing 39

Ask "If that, then what?" 57

Return to your touchstone 57

It's not about the bike 78

Avoid asking questions ... 113

Cut to the action..... 132

Make your partner look good 132

APPENDIX C:

RECOMMENDED READING

IMPROV FOR GAMERS

If you're looking for some advice about how to apply improv techniques to your GMing, check out one GM's personal account of running games without a roadmap, and this fantastic collection of essays by gamers and game designers:

- *Play Unsafe: How Improvisation Can Change the Way You Roleplay* **by Graham Walmsley**
- *Unframed: The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters* **edited by Martin Ralya**

IMPROV FOR THEATER

There are a multitude of books by improvisers, for improvisers. Here are a few from the masters to get you started:

- *Impro: Improvisation and the Theater and Impro for Storytellers* **by Keith Johnstone**
- *Improvisation for the Theater* **by Viola Spolin**
- *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* **by Mick Napier**
- *Truth in Comedy: The Manual for Improvisation* **by Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson**

IMPROV FOR LIFE

There's a lot in improv that you can put toward personal and professional development. These books give some useful insights for applying an improv mindset outside of the theater:

- *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up* **by Patricia Ryan Madson**
- *Training to Imagine* **by Kat Koppett**
- *Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses "No, But" Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration* **by Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton**

APPENDIX D:

RECOMMENDED GAMES

You can apply improv tools to collaborate, listen, and create good stories in any style of roleplaying game or larp. Here are some of our favorite games that promote improv skills.

TABLETOP GAMES

A Penny for My Thoughts by Paul Tevis

A GMless game in which amnesiac patients strive to regain their memories. It's pure storytelling and a lot of improv. In some scenes players give offers in the form of questions, to which their partner must answer "Yes, and" and justify it. In other scenes players have the ability to choose between two possible offers. Elegant design and endless possibilities. Available at *www.evilhat.com/home/a-penny-for-my-thoughts*.

A Thousand and One Nights by Meguey Baker

Take turns crafting tales of mystery and wonder, while trying to win the Sultan's favor and stay alive another night. The storyteller will set up a scene and cast other characters to play out the different parts in their tale. Available at *nightskygames.com/welcome/game/1001Nights*.

Apocalypse World by D. Vincent Baker and Meguey Baker

This harsh game featuring post-apocalyptic badasses is all about endowing—the GM asks the players questions, the players ask the GM questions, everyone contributes to the world. Also, its History mechanic creates backstory between the characters, allows characters to help or hinder each other, and changes as their relationships evolve. Available at *apocalypse-world.com*.

Archipelago by Matthijs Holter

Rather than having a single GM, this game gives each player narrative control over a particular element of the world that they build together. How much more improv crossover can you get when a game resolves situations with cards that say "yes and," "yes but," "no and," and "no but"? Available at *www.drivethrurpg.com/product/147623/Archipelago*.

Blades in the Dark **by John Harper**

Play up-and-coming scoundrels in a haunted city. Its rules for resolution ensure a sliding scale of outcomes and lots of player agency, and its opening chapters on GM techniques give a lot of improv-adjacent advice. Available at *www.evilhat.com/home/blades-in-the-dark*.

Capes **by Tony Lower-Basch**

Both collaborative and competitive, this GMless game about superheroes divides up the responsibility of narrating scenes and resolving outcomes. Available at *www.museoffire.com/Games*.

Everyone's a Suspect **by Krin Irvine**

Someone has been murdered in a small town, and everyone's a suspect. In this storytelling game, the players have fun acting super suspicious, like they could all be the murder. But you won't find out whodunit until the end! Available at *www.krin.games/games/suspect*.

Fiasco **by Jason Morningstar**

The quintessential "Yes, and" game, inspired by cinematic tales of small-time capers gone disastrously wrong. Collaboratively build characters, relationships, motives, settings, and outcomes to situations. This game is extremely versatile, with dozens of playsets offering different genres and settings. Available at *bullypulpitgames.com/games/fiasco*.

Microscope **by Ben Robbins**

Players tell the story of an entire civilization across generations, either zooming out to witness the march of history, or zooming in on characters in a specific time. Not only is the game GMless, but players are fast and loose with their characters, rarely portraying the same person twice as they jump around the timeline. Available at *www.lamemage.com/microscope*.

Monsterhearts by Avery Alder

A game about the angst-ridden lives of teenage monsters. It's a Powered by the Apocalypse game (meaning it builds on the *Apocalypse World* engine), and its Strings mechanic gives characters emotional and social leverage over each other. A very fun game for playing out queer, sexy, horror-soaked, and often tragic stories through a teen fantasy lens. The second edition is available at *buriedwithoutceremony.com/monsterhearts*.

Primetime Adventures by Matt Wilson

Create and star in your own TV series with a rules-light system. The GM takes player input to set scenes, and each protagonist has a defining internal conflict as their touchstone. Available at *www.dog-eared-designs.com*.

Reunion by Yoshi Creelman, Jenn Martin, and Andy Munich

This Descended from the Queen game uses a deck of cards with loaded questions to build the relationships of a group that was once close, but went separate ways. Available at *jennmartin.itch.io/reunion*.

Thirsty Sword Lesbians by April Kit Walsh

Duels that end in kissing, a witch gaining her power by helping others find love, and vagabond matchmakers piloting their sentient gay spaceship from system to system. This game celebrates the love, power, and existence of queer people. You tell exciting stories of swashbuckling adventures featuring characters that are all in some way emotionally vulnerable. Available at *www.swordlesbians.com*.

Zombie Cinema by Eero Tuovinen

A masterful combination of board game, card game, and cooperative storytelling game about the desperate choices one must make to stay alive when the dead walk the earth. Available at *www.arkenstonepublishing.net/zombiecinema*.

LIVE-ACTION GAMES

#Feminism edited by Misha Bushyager, Lizzie Stark, and Anna Westerling

This collection of feminist nano-games includes some very impactful larps. Games range in length, tone, and gameplay style, but all hit on contemporary feminist issues. Available at *storytelling.pelgranepress.com/feminism-a-nano-game-anthology*.

Ghost Court by Jason Morningstar

A party game for six or more players about finding justice in the spectral legal system. Ghosts and the living bring their cases to small claims court in a silly and performative larp. Cases run fast, so it may appeal to those not comfortable being in the spotlight for too long, and it's just as fun to watch as it is to play! Available at *bullypulpitgames.com/games/ghost-court*.

Juggernaut by Jason Morningstar

It's July 3, 1950, and the United States government has created a machine that can predict the future. Played at the table or as a larp, players explore the intense and eerie question of free will against the backdrop of 1950s government paranoia. Players use a deck of cards to find out what happens next—and Juggernaut is never wrong. Available at *bullypulpitgames.com/games/juggernaut*.

Sign by Kathryn Hymes and Hakan Seyalioglu

Based on the true story of Nicaraguan Sign Language, where deaf children in a country with no official sign language spontaneously created their own. This larp requires strong eye contact as the players embody students who make friends, learn about themselves, and build a language. Available at *thornygames.com/pages/sign*.

Until We Sink... by Magnus Jakobsson

A larp that could easily be played at a table, players draw scene prompts from a deck of cards. Explore relationships, secrets, and motives amongst the staff and guests on a tiny island resort—

which is slowly sinking into the ocean. Available in the fantastic book *Norwegian Style* (*www.lulu.com/content/paperback-book/norwegian-style/5140294*) with many other interesting Norwegian games!

The Upgrade by Thorbiörn Fritzon, Olle Jonsson, and Tobias Wrigstad

A freeform larp about a reality show where couples sign up to be paired with new partners, and decide if they want to stay in their old relationship or upgrade to their new one. The GMs play the in-character role of directors, cutting and framing scenes, and the audience can vote for their favorite "couple of the week." Available at *jeepen.org/games/upgrade/*.

War Birds by Moyra Turkington, Ann Kristine Eriksen, Kira Magrann, Shoshana Kessock, and Wendy Gorman

This anthology contains tabletop and live-action games about the experience and contribution of women during World War II. These semi-structured freeform games employ a mix of scene negotiation, active direction, and pushing outside your comfort zone when needed. Available at *unrulydesigns.com/war-birds/*.

GAMING FOR IMPROVISERS

By Krin Irvine

The opportunity to introduce improvisers to their first roleplaying game has its own unique considerations. Here are some tips on navigating this situation.

CHOOSE A RULES-LIGHT GAME. Games that are heavy on mechanics or number crunching can feel very constraining to folks used to creating almost everything on their own from scratch. You want your improviser friends to feel like the rules are there to help them create an experience, kind of like another improviser on stage they can say "yes, and" to, rather than a heckling audience member saying "you can't do that!" Try to choose a game that is rules-light and more open-ended.

CHOOSE A GM-LESS GAME (PROBABLY). Most improvisers perform as peers, without one person leading the show, so a game where everyone shares narrative control will likely be a more natural fit. On the other hand, if you're playing a game with a group of improvisers who are used to a more heavily directed show structure, you could try something where you take on the role of GM.

HAVE A BACKUP PLAN OR TWO. You might have found a great game for the group of people you plan to play with, but stuff happens. Maybe someone can't show up at the last minute and you want to play the chosen game another time, so have a different game to suggest that works with fewer people. Maybe people are feeling low energy when you meet, so offer something that is more simple or shorter than the original game. You might be nervous about having a great first-time experience for everyone, but try to read the room before you launch into things, and be ready to shift plans to something more appropriate if needed.

THE PEOPLE ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE GAME. Introduce and use safety tools (like the X-Card by John Stavropoulos, *tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg*) to create an environment where everyone can feel more comfortable, and aren't coerced into going somewhere they'd prefer not to. Remember that the players are always more important than any rules. People having a good time (and maybe wanting to play again sometime in the future) matters more than any particular thing happening in the game.

DISCUSS TONE AND CONTENT. Get everyone on the same page about what kind of game this is going to be. You might want to start by aiming for a more "serious" tone, knowing that many improvisers will naturally drift towards light-hearted anyway. Depending on the game, you might want to stress the importance of world-building, character relationships, and collaborative storytelling. You should also discuss the themes and mood in the game and allow people to opt out ahead of time of anything they don't want to spend their time engaging with.

FACILITATE FLEXIBLY. Even the most imaginative people can start to feel timid when trying something new, so your fellow game players might need some gentle prodding to contribute. Keep an eye on who might be

talking more or less and try to shift the spotlight around if necessary. On the other hand, if things are flowing more smoothly, be willing to take a back seat from this role.

PRAISE PROFUSELY. One of the great things about playing a game that is different from performing is you can offer instant feedback about things that you like. The improvisers might be used to being funny or entertaining, so they probably don't need positive reinforcement for that, but think about what type of collaboration you do want to reinforce, and offer up appreciation when that happens. Maybe a player helps someone else do something to develop a part of their character, or they do something that drives the overall story narrative forward, or they do something that is a particularly good match for the tone of the game. Tell them publicly what they just did that was awesome. That'll help everyone know what the expectations are and what they should try to do more.

TAKE BREAKS. Give your players frequent chances to have some downtime. In addition to giving their brains a rest, this is a good opportunity for anybody to ask questions without feeling like they're interrupting, as well as for you to assess how things are going and give yourself a chance to adjust your own plans or expectations if needed.

BE WILLING TO END EARLY TO FINISH WELL. Games for first-time players can take longer than you expect. If you're reaching your allotted end time, or if energy levels seem to be dropping earlier, you might want to wrap things up sooner than the game structure typically allows. Adjust the game if necessary. For example, maybe you can skip a round of scenes, or let everyone do short epilogues for their characters instead of the normal game ending. If you need a chance to think about the best course of action, you can call a break time to figure this out.

HAVE FUN! Facilitating a game doesn't mean it's your job to entertain other people through personal sacrifice. Talk about any issues as they arise and use these tips to give yourself a good time as well. You're playing too (even if you are a GM), and you are also more important than the game.

APPENDIX E:

CHARACTERS, LOCATIONS, AND RELATIONSHIPS

You can reference these lists to easily give players a starting idea for their scene: where they are, who they are, how they know each other, or their point of view. It's more fun if you don't try to find the most logical combination, like pairing a work relationship with their respective business location, or starting a scene at the top of a mountain if your character is afraid of heights. Just pick at random! Rather than two astronauts on a space station talking about space, what would they talk about if they were shopping in a grocery store or cleaning out an attic?

We've included a variety of mundane and out-of-the-ordinary suggestions. (You can also make just about any mundane suggestion into something more fantastical by adding a genre to it—*magical* auto repair shop, *cyberpunk* skate park, *noir* detective and informant, *post-apocalyptic* house flippers...)

If you're looking for inspiration for a single character, use one half of any relationship.

POINT OF VIEW
(MUNDANE)

	FACTS	FEELINGS
1	I always get in a morning run.	I can't stand when things are dirty.
2	I always get the lead in the school play.	I don't like to be rushed.
3	I always have snacks in my bag.	I hate the shoes I put on today.
4	I always keep $10 in change on me.	I hate the word "moist."
5	I always tip 25%.	I just love Disney.
6	I am such a morning person!	I love a good deal.
7	I can't remember names, but I remember faces.	I love babies!
8	I don't own a computer.	I love having houseguests.
9	I get tarot readings on a regular basis.	I love romantic comedies.
10	I haven't slept in three days.	I love trains!
11	I maintain the neighborhood phone tree.	I think you can do anything if you have enough heart.
12	I make my own kombucha.	I want to believe in life on other planets.
13	I never back down from a challenge.	I wish I traveled more.
14	I never learned how to swim.	I'm afraid of helicopters.
15	I never repeat myself.	I'm in love with my best friend.
16	I read romance novels secretly.	I'm not fond of cats, but they love me.
17	I speak eight languages.	I'm shy.
18	I'm a night owl.	I'm very afraid of germs.
19	I've never left my home town.	I'm very into hot yoga.
20	I've won the county cook-off three years running.	I've been thinking of breaking up with my partner.

POINT OF VIEW
(OUT OF THE ORDINARY)

	FACTS	FEELINGS
1	I always have at least four knives hidden on me.	I believe in fairies.
2	I do bad things for good reasons.	I believe vigilantes are nothing but trouble.
3	I get tarot readings on a regular basis.	I hate humans—it's the smell.
4	I have a great destiny to fulfill.	I hate violin music.
5	I make all my decisions with a coin flip.	I just love being evil.
6	I absorbed my twin in the womb.	I love being a minion.
7	I pay extra for ethically sourced dragon scales.	I love hoarding shiny things.
8	I steal things just to give them back.	I love the color purple. Like, a lot.
9	I stole the homeroom pet rabbit.	I love traveling by hot air balloon.
10	I think my house is haunted.	I must have the magic oculus.
11	I used to be a prizefighter.	I regret becoming immortal.
12	I was created by a child's wish.	I regret becoming mortal.
13	I'm a Jupiter spy.	I want revenge.
14	I'm hiding that I was bit by a vampire.	I want to hack the Gibson.
15	I'm hiding that I was bit by a werewolf.	I want to punch a god.
16	I'm hiding that I was bit by a zombie.	I want to steal the Declaration of Independence.
17	I'm in the wrong timeline.	I want to take over the world.
18	I'm in witness protection.	I wish I could go on a quest.
19	I've evaded the IRS for 17 years.	I'm afraid of my own shadow.
20	Sometimes I see the future—but just three seconds.	I'm afraid of the moon.

LOCATION
(MUNDANE)

	OUTSIDE	INSIDE	BUSINESS	EVENT
1	Apple orchard	Adoption clinic	Art gallery	Bachelorette party
2	Behind the bleachers	Arcade	Bakery	Bake sale
3	Boat	Butterfly habitat	Department of Motor Vehicles	Blind date
4	Bootcamp	Cabin	Farmer's market	Community theater play
5	Bridge	Casino	Frame shop	Costume party
6	Designated smoking area	Catwalk for theater lighting rig	Gas station	Disco bowling party
7	Farm	Coffee shop	Greasy spoon diner	Funeral
8	Ferris wheel	Comedy club	Hardware store	Game night
9	Fire escape	Fire lookout tower	Hospital waiting room	High-school talent show
10	Golf course	Garage	IKEA	House meeting
11	Hot air balloon	Hotel lobby	Laundromat	In line for a roller coaster
12	Motel parking lot	Hotel room	Library	Miniature steam train ride
13	Nature trail	Jail cell	Mall	Office holiday party
14	Picnic spot	Kitchen	Mechanic's shop	Paint & Sip party
15	Side of the highway	Nightclub	Michelin star restaurant	Prom
16	Skate park	Office breakroom	Office cubicle	Retiree cruise
17	Summer camp	Reptile house	Operating room	Reunion
18	Tidepools	Salon	Train museum	Ski trip
19	Train tracks	School lunchroom	Voting center	Tree house club meeting
20	Tree house	Walk-in fridge	Warehouse packing center	Yoga class

LOCATION #2
(MUNDANE)

	OUTSIDE	INSIDE	BUSINESS	EVENT
1	Abandoned factory	Attic	Assembly line	4H club
2	Beach	Back of an ambulance	Bank	Awards banquet
3	Campground	Call center	Bowling alley	Baby shower
4	Community garden	Changing room	Carwash	Bachelor party
5	Desert	Classroom	Daycare center	Beach clean-up
6	Dock	Dance studio	Grocery store	Birdwatching hike
7	Duck blind	Detention	Ice cream shop	County cook-off
8	Edge of a lake	Drunk tank	Jewelry store	Neighborhood potluck
9	Forest	Elevator	Museum	Night hike
10	Gondola	Fast food restaurant	News station	On a flight
11	Lifeboat	Food court	Newspaper office	Photography class
12	Make-out point	Karaoke bar	Paint-your-own-pottery store	Photoshoot
13	Marathon finish line	Laboratory	Pet store	PTA meeting
14	Mountaintop	Lighthouse	Police station	Pub quiz
15	Park bench	Nursing home	Post office	Real-estate open house
16	Playground	Old mill	Sporting goods department	Spa day
17	Rest stop	Root cellar	Unemployment office	Stargazing
18	Swamp	School nurse's office	Used car lot	Stuck in traffic
19	Top of the Empire State Building	Shipping container	Wax museum	Wedding reception
20	Vineyard	Theater concession stand	Zoo	Yard sale

LOCATION
(OUT OF THE ORDINARY)

	OUTSIDE	INSIDE	BUSINESS	EVENT
1	At the bottom of a well	Abandoned shack	Abandoned mall	Bank heist
2	At the edge of a bottomless pit	Booby-trapped temple	Adventurer's tavern	Centennial Fae Court
3	Atop the battlements	Bunker	Apothecary	Colonial reen-actment village
4	Car Town	Clone factory	Fortune-telling booth	Crime scene
5	Crater	Dragon's lair	Gold Rush saloon	Duel
6	Gates to the kingdom	Galley of a pirate ship	Magic supply store	Endurance course
7	Haunted woods	Giant cage	Magic wand shop	Exotic bird show
8	Hot tub	Home for magical children	McMurdo Station	Gathering of the clans
9	Magical wishing well	Jeffrey's tubes	Moving truck	Hiding from a goose
10	Private island	Outpost 2-817	Post-apocalyptic family restaurant	Hot-dog-eating contest
11	Prow of a pirate ship	Shuttle to Mars	Resistance headquarters	In line for the executioner
12	Sacred grove	Skull-shaped volcano lair	Retirement home for supers	Jousting tournament
13	Sentient hedge maze	Space elevator	Santa's workshop	Peace-treaty negotiations
14	Sinking ship	Spooky mansion	Sickbay	Reading of the will
15	Swamp of Despair	The belly of a whale	Space station bridge	Renaissance faire
16	The Mirror Realm	Thieves' guild headquarters	Space station cargo hold	Royal gala
17	The Underworld	Throne room	Subarine comms center	Seance
18	Village ruins	Time machine lab	Teleportation deck	Splitting up the loot
19	Volcano	Tunnel under a bank vault	The Cosmic Library	Street race
20	Wyvern's nest	Wizard's tower	Villain's pub	Trapped in a labrynth

RELATIONSHIP
(MUNDANE)

	WORK	HOME	PLAY
1	Activist and CEO	AirBnB host and renter	Bandmates
2	Archaeologists	Boarding school bunkmates	Beachcombers
3	Artist and model	College dorm-mates	Bird watchers
4	Astronauts	Couch-surfing friend and host	Bridesmaids
5	Boss and assistant	Engaged couple	Brunch buddies
6	Camp counsellors	Ex step-siblings	Celebrity and ghost writer
7	Car-share driver and passenger	Ex-spouses	Christmas carolers
8	Celebrity and interviewer	Grandparent and grandchild	Co-chairs of the yearbook club
9	Coworkers	HOA president and homeowner	Community service volunteers
10	Dentist and patient	Homeowner and package thief	Dance-off competetors
11	High school senior and minion	Identical twins	Graffiti artists
12	House flippers	Lighthouse keepers	Influencers
13	Minor league athletes	Married stricly for tax purposes	Old high school sports rivals
14	Morning talk show hosts	New parents	One-sided friendship
15	Parking valets	Overnight guest and host	Poet and muse
16	Rival real-estate agents	Parent and live-in nanny	Spin-class buddies
17	Secret shopper and clerk	Re-married ex-partners	Tourist and colorful local
18	Teacher and student	Roommate and roommate's ex	Two sides of a love triangle
19	Teachers	Siblings in law	Washed-up actors
20	Tour guide and tourist	Step-siblings	Wedding crashers

RELATIONSHIP #2
(MUNDANE)

	WORK	HOME	PLAY
1	Artist and patron	Apartment manager and tenant	Academic rivals
2	Ballet dancers	Babysitter and kid only 3 years younger	Bride and maid of honor
3	Baristas	College student and RA	Celebrity and fan
4	Bartender and regular	Competitive neighbors	Childhood best friends
5	Boss and employee	Elderly and live-in caretaker	Coworkers' partners
6	Bouncer and club-goer	Former tenant and new tenant	Fashionistas
7	Coach and athlete	High-rise tenant and lobby security	Fellow social outcasts
8	Doctor and patient	Homeowner and house-sitter	Frenemies
9	Farmers	Homeowner and postal carrier	Friends who swiped right
10	Food critic and restaurant owner	Married couple	Gamblers
11	Lawyer and client	Neighbor and nosey neighbor	Groom and best man
12	Mechanic and client	Parent and child	Gym-goer and trainer
13	Nurses	Parent and child's date	Hunting buddies
14	Politicians	Pet-owner and pet-sitter	Peoplewatchers
15	Principal and troublemaker	Retired couple	PTA members
16	Rival used-car salespeople	Roommates	Quilting club members
17	Salesperson and important client	Siblings	Rival A-list actors
18	Students	Spite house owner and neighbor	Secret friends
19	Travel writer and local	Spouse and in-law	Superfans
20	Wedding planner and bride/groom	Two sides of a duplex	Tennis buddies

RELATIONSHIP
(OUT OF THE ORDINARY)

	WORK	HOME	PLAY
1	Bank manager and hacker	Android and creater	Actor and physical trainer
2	Bellhop and newlywed	Babies when the parents aren't around	Alien and human
3	Bounty hunter and bounty	Bear and cub	Apocalypse preppers
4	Car mechanic and street racer	Both turned by the same vampire	Blackmailer and victim
5	Detective and informant	Creatures living in the same dungeon	Cultists
6	Disgruntled workshop elves	Druid and giant animal	Demon and exorcist
7	Jockey and horse vet	Homeowner and squatter	Demon and summoner
8	Kaiju cleanup crew	Human and extra-terrestrial roommate	Fighter ace and mechanic
9	Ladies maids	Messy and tidy roommates	Frog and fly
10	Monster and monster hunter	Person in heaven and angel	Guitarist and roadie
11	Moon base security guard and janitor	Reality show couple	Last two of a tontine
12	Nun and Mother Superior	Reality show housemates	Mermaid and diver
13	Pilot and flight tower	Sorcerer and magic mirror	Organ doner and recipient
14	Rally driver and pit crew	Spouse in labor and panicked spouse	Party animal and cop
15	Seasoned adventurer and newbie	Supervillain and prison guard	Person and their conscience
16	Sheriff and deputy	Telepathic twins	Rival street racers
17	Ship's captain and ship's counselor	Vampire roommates for 300 years	Suspects for a murder who are each other's alibi
18	Superhero and villain	Ventriloquist and doll	Talking car and owner
19	Union leader and CEO	Villagers	Werewolf pack members
20	Vigilante and police chief	Witch and familiar	Zombie survivor and recently bitten

RELATIONSHIP #2
(OUT OF THE ORDINARY)

	WORK	HOME	PLAY
1	Astronaut and ground control	Castaway and beach ball	Actor and understudy
2	Burglars	Celebrity and live-in life coach	Bus driver and regular
3	Butler and head chef	Cellies at the state prison	Celebrity and paparazzi
4	Con artist and mark	Child and monster under the bed	Chess boxers
5	Dungeon guards	Ghost and hauntee	Computer hackers
6	Farmer and scarecrow	Giant and golden goose	Facebook-only friends
7	Innkeeper and adventurer	Gold Rush homesteaders	Forger and crime boss
8	Landscaper and pool cleaner	Magical orphans	Game show contestants
9	Logger and forest ranger	Monarch and court jester	Hunter and prey
10	Movie star and accountant	Original and clone	Inventor and neighbor kid
11	Philosopher and apprentice	Pet-owner and pet	IPA home brewer buddies
12	Politician and biggest donor	Room service and hotel visitor	Kid and imaginary friend
13	Researcher and station's AI	Royalty and messenger	Oracle and quester
14	Royalty and knight	Toys when the kid isn't around	Orchid collectors
15	Secret agents	Undercover fake family	Pool hustler and gambler
16	Shopkeeper and talking magic item	Vigilante and spouse	Psychic and skeptic
17	Spy and handler	Year-round cruise-goers	Shapeshifters
18	Tattoo artist and piercer	You and you from two years in the future	Treasure hunters
19	Teleporter mechanics	Zookeeper and favorite animal	Villager and fairy godparent
20	Wizard and minion	Zookeeper and least favorite animal	Yo-yo artists

CONTRIBUTORS

Alex Dodge *contributing author • he/him*

Alex Dodge has been performing and teaching improv for the past 22 years across the Midwest and East coast. As an instructor, Alex has taught improv classes in scenework, character, and long-form for Hashtag Comedy Columbus, The Baltimore Improv Group, and for Indiana University, and he currently serves as the Arts Director of The Arts and College Preparatory Academy in Columbus, Ohio, where he teaches improv and comedy performance. In addition to his improv work, Alex is an avid tabletop gamer, and he regularly puts his improv skills to work when he plays or creates games. His game *Fork Creek Almanac*, co-written with Matt Jent, won a Golden Cobra 2018, and he regularly writes and designs games in a game design workshop at the The Arts and College Preparatory Academy.

Aser Tolentino *contributing author, accessibility consultant • he/him*

Aser and Megan Tolentino were brought together over the internet through their love of tabletop RPGs and speculative fiction. They now live in Sacramento where Aser works as a tenant rights attorney and assistive technology instructor. He is usually found in the company of his guide dog Dixie, or sporadically releasing episodes for their Actual Play Podcasts: The Redacted Files and The Amber Clave.

Ash Cheshire *contributing author • fae/fem/faer or they/them*

Ash Cheshire worked professionally as an actor and then as a trained drama therapist before disability led to a transition to faer current work as a game designer and artist. You can find more of Ash's games at ashcangames.itch.io or get all the games fresh and hot by becoming a supporter at *Patreon.com/ashcheshire*.

Brandon Wentz *contributing author • he/him*

Brandon (Rev) Wentz is the executive producer at Critshow Studios, GMing and producing The Critshow (A Monster of the Week actual play podcast) as well as let's plays for new and newly launching RPGs, and hours of weekly patreon content. He holds an MFA in acting from UGA and has worked with EarPlay on a number of interactive games, including Pugmire, The Orpheus Project, and Mr. Robot. Brandon is also the co-host of the Emmy award-winning PBS show Journey Indiana.

Cris Viana *layout and graphic designer • she/her*

Cris Viana is a Brazilian graphic designer, specialized in editorial design and typography. She has been in love with RPGs since high school, and now she works with it, doing layout RPG books for Brazilian publishers and abroad! When she's not working, she plays Arabic percussion, drinks lots of tea, invents crazy makeup to use on RPG streams, and her Changeling Brazilian world-building is famous countrywide and has unofficially been named "Crisverse." You can find her online at *crisvianastudio.com* and on Twitter @crislv.

Gabriella Rincón *proofreader • she/her*

Gabriella is an editor for Lesser Known Comics and a proofreader for Curious Corvid Publishing. When she's not working, Gabriella can be found lost in a book or building worlds of her own in her notebooks. Fun fact: When she was a child, she wanted to be a knight. Although she still doesn't own a sword, wielding a pen has served her just as well.

Hakan Seyalıoğlu *contributing author • he/him*

Hakan Seyalıoğlu is 50% of Thorny Games, an independent design studio of larps and RPGs that tells new and unconventional stories. In his design, he's explored what language means for us culturally and emotionally, and how it can be an engaging mechanic for play. A GenCon Industry Insider, a keynote speaker at multiple conferences, and co-designer of multiple Indiecade Finalists and Award Winners, Hakan hopes to spread the word of play. Hakan helps computers keep secrets and crack codes (a genuine cryptographer). He also really enjoys breakfast.

Erica Riddick *contributing author • she/her*

Erica Riddick is a devised theater dramaturg and improv performer who was enticed into RPG back rooms through the gateway game Fiasco. Also a competitive ballroom dancer, Erica adores improvisation in all its earthly forms, especially LARP for its physicality. She's always up to play *Revived: A Support Group For The Partially Deceased and Gone*. Erica has dipped a baby toe into the game developer waters with their first game, *Lost & Found*, exploring the unexpected objects that enter and exit our lives. "I love RPGs because the end result must be created in partnership (I see you solo RPGs, and playing together is where the magic happens!)." Erica is captivated by a good story in any form, and the intersection of those mediums. She's trying to break the sixth wall through a playwriting exploration of life insurance.

Jacky Leung *editor • he/him*

Jacky is an ENnie award-winning Chinese American TTRPG writer, editor, and designer. He is also the Creative Manager for Unbreakable Publishers, seeking to uplift Asian creators to tell their stories in their own voices. He has worked for Paizo, MCDM, Baldman Games, and others. He is a big-time foodie, sampling cuisine from around the world whenever the travel time permits. You might also spy Jacky's improvisation and appearance in multiple murder mysteries lost to time, always seemingly cast as the culprit—he swears he didn't do it!

Jahmal Brown *contributing author • he/him*

Freelance game designer, professional gamemaster, and host of the Diceology podcast, Jahmal "Mad Jay" Brown has works published by Evil Hat Productions, Fandom/Cortex Prime, and Paizo Inc. He likes games and stories about outsiders and underdogs. Jay games with his kids and loves his momma but she doesn't game yet. You can tweet him @madjayzero.

James Aaron Oh *contributing author • he/him*

James Aaron Oh's time playing D&D likely spurred on his career as an actor, which is where his knowledge of structured improv stems from. He hopes the tips he has added to this book similarly spur a love for the spontaneous creation that only TTRPGs can facilitate. You can find him playing TTRPGs on Quests and Chaos via Twitch or YouTube. For his acting career, check out *www.jamesaaronoh.com* or @jamesaaronoh on Instagram for the latest news. Wishing you all the best in your adventures and keep on rolling!

James Mendez Hodes *contributing author • he/him*

Mendez is a writer, cultural consultant, and game designer. You might know his writing from articles like "Orcs, Britons, and the Martial Race Myth," his consulting work from games like *Magic: the Gathering* and the Jackbox Party Packs, or his design work from Avatar *Legends* or *Thousand Arrows*. He has an academic background in West African religion, Eastern classics, dance, and English literature. His interests include martial arts, hip hop, and collecting stuffed animals. He lives in the greater New York metropolitan area.

Jason Morningstar *contributing author • he/him*

Jason Morningstar is an analog game and experience designer who lives in Durham, North Carolina, USA. Best known for his game *Fiasco*, which earned him his second Diana Jones Award for Gaming Excellence, Jason's design credits include *Ghost Court*, *Night Witches*, and many other games. His work was featured in the Gen Con 50th anniversary collection. Beyond tabletop and live action games, Jason consults on designed playfulness with organizations like Google, the University of Michigan, UNICEF, and Kaiser-Permanente Health Care. In addition to design, Jason has spoken extensively on game-related topics to groups like the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Cympub-Korea, and ECGC.

Jay Treat *contributing author • he/him*

Jay Treat is a full-time board game designer, part-time actor, and constant improviser. He's performed on the Colorado stage, with Second City and The Groundlings, and is writing his own improv book. Karen Twelves taught Jay's second-ever improv workshop, and he's honored to be part of the sequel to her first outstanding book on the subject. Games and improv are for everyone, and I'm ever grateful to share them.

Kanesha C. Bryant *artist • she/her*

Kanesha is an illustrator/comic artist/monster enthusiast who enjoys writing lore and learning cool animal facts. She specialises in creating eldritch creatures who are just doing their best and 'comfort horror', which is exactly what it sounds like. She is currently, like the creatures she creates, just doing her best.

Karen Twelves *author • she/her*

Karen Twelves has been teaching improv for over a decade for theater companies, corporate workshops, and through the GoogleArts program. She teaches her Improv for Gamers workshop series at conventions across the country, including Big Bad Con, Origins Game Fair, and GenCon. Karen is also an editor, and has worked on games such as *Fiasco*, *Dialect*, *Blades in the Dark*, and *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*. She loves playing one-shot games with epic wins and disastrous fails, and will tell you all about her duelist character from a truly epic "Kingmaker" Pathfinder campaign.

Krin Irvine *contributing author • they/them*

Krin Irvine is an occasional game designer and frequent gamemaster and player, who loves solving puzzles and storytelling with their friends. They are also an experienced improv theater instructor, director, and performer. Wearing their various hats, they have enjoyed facilitating people's first experiences of playing games or improv, including plenty of people experienced with one but brand new to the other. They also contributed to the *Fiasco Companion* in a chapter on improv and gaming.

Liisa Lee *contributing author • she/her*

Liisa Lee is a multi-faceted creator. She's an award-winning voice actor, voiceover producer, food photographer, game writer, and PR marketing director. Her career spans musical theater and professional ballet, apprenticing with the American Dance Machine at 13, and her first broadway national tour at 15. Film, TV, and college brought her to LA. She's also an alum of the Beverly Hills Playhouse. Her game-writing career includes work on *Dragon Realms*, *Gemstone IV*, *Fantasy University*, and pre-production design, casting, and consulting on D&D Live, as well as award-winning live play podcasts D&D Live: Off The Table, Dice Camera Action, How We Roll, Red Moon Roleplaying, and more. She rode elephants before she could ride a bike, and has been killed by a horse kick, but that's another story.

Lizzie Stark *contributing author • she/her*

Lizzie Stark is an author, journalist, and award-winning game designer. Her most recent book is Egg: A Dozen Ovatures, although in gaming circles she's best known for 2012's Leaving Mundania, about larp, and its accompanying blog site, and for co-editing the #Feminism collection of nanogames. For her, game design is all about collaboration—frequent collaborators include Jason Morningstar and Bjarke Pedersen. Their work has appeared at game conventions and theater festivals throughout the world. She relishes introducing first-timers to roleplaying with well-designed workshops that foster collaboration and creativity while supporting any new participants who have the jitters.

Marcus Sams *contributing author • he/him*

Marcus Sams is the founder of Moment Improv Theatre as well as the Artistic Director of the San Francisco Improv Festival and a board member of The Improv Network. Moment Improv (established 2014) is one of the first African-American owned improv training centers in the United States. Marcus is a pioneer in the online improv space. He has created the style known as Teleprov, advancing what is possible in the world of online improv. Between 2020 and 2022 he taught over 960 hours of online improv instruction. He also facilitates online, in-person, and hybrid team-building sessions for companies like Google, Microsoft, and LinkedIn, among many others. Marcus also serves on Union Square Alliance's marketing committee, is the co-founder of the Bay Area Film Mixer, and has professional representation through MDT Talent.

Mary C. Parker *contributing author • she/her*

Mary C. Parker is an international applied theater facilitator, consultant, and coach. She earned an MA in Applied Theatre, a BA in Sociology, and is a credentialed International Coach Federation (ICF) Professional Coach. She has researched and published in the areas of identity, comedy, and structural racism. In her applied theater work, Mary employs humor to deepen humility and disrupt fragility, one laugh at a time. As a teacher, Mary educates on topics of anti-oppression and white supremacy culture, creating ensembles, and using our identities to create characters. As a performer, Mary has performed in improv festivals around the world, played on London, UK, and Pittsburgh, PA-based improv teams, and had a recurring role in a virtual dramatic improv soap opera series. More about Mary and her work can be found on her website, *www.marycparker.com*.

Maegan Penley *artist • she/her*

Maegan Penley is, according to her husband, a swashbuckling heroine who overcame great internal struggle and nearly unbeatable odds to rescue an entire planet from an invading species of parasitic aliens. She may also (and possibly more accurately) be known as an illustrator who loves helping authors bring their works to life. She enjoys working with a wide variety of media, and particularly loves any project that is lighthearted or nostalgic. (Or both!) She lives in Georgia with her imaginative husband and two energetic boys. She tries to get at least 8 hours of sleep whenever possible.

Megan Tolentino *contributing author, accessibility consultant • she/her*

Megan is a TTRPG podcaster and sometimes game designer. She has an enthusiastic passion for horror, octopuses, science, accessibility, and cryptids. She has learned much about accessibility standards through her husband Aser and work as a software developer.

Meguey Baker *contributing author • she/her*

Meguey Baker started playing RPGs as a child with her sister and two friends in the 1970s. As a co-designer with her husband, her work on their award-winning *Apocalypse World* broke ground with attention to the characters' relationship to sexuality. In their newest game *Under Hollow Hills*, a key question is how characters are in relation to each other when times are good and when times are bad. Meg has a background in counseling, education, ritual design, history, and dance. She believes everyone has a story worth telling, and that we are all connected. She is the curator of a local history museum, where she delights in the stories of all kinds of relationships.

Senda Linaugh *contributing author • she/her*

Senda Linaugh is known for her un-spellable Twitter handle and contagious giggle. She is a podcaster and game designer who favors improv GMing and rules-light systems. While she loves a good long-form campaign, life has conspired to make her extremely well versed in running one-shots of 4 hours or less. You can hear her dulcet tones on the ENnie nominated podcast She's a Super Geek or on Panda's Talking Games, or catch more of her gaming opinions in written form on Gnomestew.com.

Trivia Fox *art director • they/them*

Trivia has worked in games in some form or another for over a decade, first as an illustrator before moving into creative management. Their journey in using tabletop games as a form of personal expression and exploration started in the late 90s and hasn't stopped since—though now they are more often working behind the scenes in art management! Notable projects include *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, and *My Little Pony Roleplaying Game*. Trivia's day job is Art Acquisitions Manager for RPGs at Renegade Game Studios. You can find them on Twitter @DarkDeerTrivia.