

# Tensions in Live-Action Roleplaying Game Design

## A Case Study with the MIT Assassins' Guild

by

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## Abstract

A textual analysis of games of the MIT Assassins' Guild with an ethnographic and historical slant provides an analysis of five kinds of tensions in the process of the design and the implementation of mechanics in MIT Assassins' Guild Live-Action Roleplaying games. These tensions are a product of a combination of the history of roleplaying games and other Live-Action simulative activities, the specific logistical and historical circumstances of the MIT Assassins' Guild and the expectations of the members of the MIT Assassins' Guild. Game designers and players frequently cite case studies and have developed a useful vocabulary that are worth learning to facilitate further discussion of game design.

Guild game mechanics are designed for feasibility of implementation and execution by the game designers and the players, to provide and hide information from players in a timely manner, to dissociate player decisions from character actions, to enhance the verisimilitude and the atmosphere of the game for the players, and to generate, balance and resolve interesting competition among players. Experienced game designers keep all these tensions in mind while designing mechanics that can satisfy all the criteria and highlight desirable traits that arise from the interplay of the tensions.

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# The Context of the Thesis

*“Can you give us any reason why we shouldn’t just shoot you right now?”*

## Game Design as Theory

Before detailing the approach used in the compilation and the presentation of information in this thesis, it might be useful to note how this thesis might fit in the overall body of academic work that currently exists in the field of game studies.

Many writings about games focus on fitting various aspects of game play into some sort of psychological schema. These works provide criteria that can be used as tools for comparing one form, concept or iteration of a game against another. In this way, academics have distilled insights of the values and qualities of play that are valuable for enjoying the experience of the game<sup>1</sup> or developing the human brain<sup>2</sup> and the social character of the individual. Some studies also list the actual activities within game play as means of opening a window into the machinations of an individual’s psyche<sup>3</sup> or a group’s social structure.

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<sup>1</sup> “Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life.’” [Huizinga, J. (1949) Homo ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.]

<sup>2</sup> “Games follow one another at relatively constant age stages, determined by the content of the ludic activities: the content corresponds to ancestral activities which have followed one another in the same order in the course of human evolution: the function of children’s play is to liberate the species from these residues, at the same time hastening its development towards higher stages (hence the famous comparison between play and the tadpole’s tail).” [Piaget, J. (1962) Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood. New York: W. N. Norton.]

<sup>3</sup> Turkle, S. (1995) Life on the Screen. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Comparative criteria are also a means of highlighting the unique qualities of different genres of games. Man, Play and Games by Roger Caillois approaches this objective by separating games into categories of Alea<sup>4</sup>, Agon<sup>5</sup>, Mimicry<sup>6</sup> and Ilynx<sup>7</sup>. Instead of assuming that all “play” shares certain inherent and general qualities, genre taxonomy stresses that the umbrella terms of “play” and “game” may describe some very different kinds of activity. This sort of structuralist approach also stresses that understanding the differences can be important for understanding the unique qualities of various types of games that may have very little to do with each other.

Both of the approaches above highlight play as an experience from the point of view of the gamer or as a general activity fundamental to human experience. When it comes to the design and creation of games, however, the writings tend to focus on either age-old games with long-established rule sets or social games with eminently pliable rules. Some ethnographers address game design by looking at instances of modification and adherence to rules, finding indicators of underlying social processes within a community.

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<sup>4</sup> “All games that are based on a decision independent of the player ... in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary.” [Caillois, R. (1961) Man, Play and Games. New York: Free Press.]

<sup>5</sup> “Competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner’s triumph.” [Caillois, 1961]

<sup>6</sup> “The subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another.” [Caillois, 1961]

<sup>7</sup> “Those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind.” [Caillois, 1961]

Katie Salen<sup>8</sup> mentions how different children can have their own unique understanding of what it means to “play nice,” illustrating how play can be influenced by Bernard Suits’ “lusory attitude<sup>9</sup>” instead of a rule set. Clifford Geertz’s seminal article on the game of Balinese cockfighting<sup>10</sup> is a significant essay in cultural anthropology in which the authority of individuals and cliques has a fundamental role in the process of play.

Formal academic forays into game design tend to fit the general categories of systems analysis or mathematical game theory<sup>11</sup>. There is a wealth of research in abstract algorithms, paradigms and rules of thumb that may be equally relevant in the production of commercial games and the simulation of complex systems. Such work has proved to be a helpful base for building discussions regarding the play of commercial games; recent studies on emergent game play in commercial games borrow some of their vocabulary<sup>12</sup> from writings on systems and probability theory.

My thesis certainly borrows from all these academic threads of game and play, with a particular emphasis on game design. I discuss both the rituals of game play and the

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<sup>8</sup> Salen K. and Zimmerman E. (2003) “Breaking the Rules of a Game” Game Developers Conference, San Jose, CA.

<sup>9</sup> Suits, B. (1978) The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.]

<sup>10</sup> Geertz, C. (1972) “Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight”, The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>11</sup> Von Neumann, J. and Morgenstern, O. (1944) Theory of Games and Economic Behavior. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>12</sup> “A game is most simply described as framework for structured play. In most cases, this structure will include some type of goal, obstacles to that goal, resources to help you achieve the goal, as well as consequences, in the form of penalties and rewards (which can often translate into obstacles and resources.) At its simplest level, these elements create a generic deconstructed narrative structure of sorts.” [Pearce, C. (2002) First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.]

evolution of game rules as a function of the social interactions of a specific group of people. I also look into various methods used to provide role-players with a variety of entertaining experiences and interesting choices, and one look at my index should be evidence that I have not avoided the taxonomy bug.

However, in my examination of the writings by all of the theorists listed above, as well as their peers in the footnotes, there is little information for outside observers who wish to gain insight into the way that experienced game designers understand their own craft. Academics use terminology that is well suited for an academic audience, and indeed, some game designers may see their rule sets and game mechanics as a means of influencing social interaction or for generating a specific set of ludic interactions. However, such designers are relatively rare; those who consciously employ such considerations while in the process of designing their games are even rarer.

Game designers may use checklists to see if their games fit within taxonomies of game play but these lists are often markedly different from those written by academic theorists. They may also employ mathematical formulae and concepts of systems dynamics in the service of producing a playable game. However, the game designer is more likely to use vocabulary that eschews “solution sets” and “symmetric dependence” for phrases such as “group plots” and “hit points.”

Even though many games pose interesting systems optimization challenges, these qualities often arise outside of the consideration the designer, who is usually more

concerned with balancing playability against world fidelity. Furthermore, most academic analyses of game designs only apply after the designer has completed his or her work, benefiting from a point of view that game designers do not possess in the thick of creating their game.

In fact, there seems to be a particular lack of attention or respect for the vocabulary and the processes adopted by game designers for the very purpose of understanding, optimizing and expediting their craft. Yet some groups of game designers, especially those who are in close contact with other designers within their genre of gaming, have been able to develop elaborate and often comprehensive techniques that allow them to create effective and fulfilling gaming experiences for their players. They may borrow concepts from the academic arena of games and play but instead of trying to illustrate complexity or compare disparate traits, these techniques help predict potential game interactions and tune the experience of game players to respond to the expectations of game designers.

To supply a framework that facilitates the understanding of discussions and rules-of-thumb employed by game designers, it might help to see game designers as a “community of practice,” a term that Wenger coins to describe a creative community engaged in an interplay of theory and practice where “neither is the concrete solidly self-evident, nor the abstract transcendently general; rather, both gain their meanings within the perspectives of specific practices and can thus obtain a multiplicity of

interpretations.”<sup>13</sup> He examines “dualities” operating in such communities by defining dualities as “a single conceptual unit that is formed by two inseparable and mutually constitutive elements whose inherent tension and complementarity give the concept richness and dynamism.” Dualities are not opposites; they are two dimensions that interact but do not necessarily define a spectrum; they imply each other and do not substitute for each other; they transform their relation and do not translate into each other; they describe interplay and are not classificatory categories. His dualities are one application of “tensions” as elaborated by Engeström,<sup>14</sup> which operate in much the same way but do not necessarily require that all the factors influencing the creative work of a community be grouped into dualities of two. I am thus employing this concept of “tension” to describe the often-conflicting forces that apply to the decisions of game designers as a step towards the improved availability of information regarding the processes employed by game designers themselves.

This thesis addresses this issue by taking a close look at a very specific group of game designers and drawing out some commonalities among assorted tensions that apply to the design and implementation of their games, citing examples that the game designers themselves use as case studies for innovative and refined game mechanics. Gathered from close interactions with these game designers and their associated player-clientele over three years, the case studies in this thesis should provide some useful information

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<sup>13</sup> Wenger, E. (1998) Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Engeström, Y. (1987) Learning by Expanding. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.

for theorists who may be interested in observing game design at the level of actual application.

## The Subject and Scope

Obviously, different types of games have different tensions and require different considerations from designers. To keep the subject and size of this thesis manageable, I restrict most of the case studies and comparisons to a style of Live-Action Roleplaying employed by the MIT Assassins' Guild, a 20 year old gaming community in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that is active both in design and in frequent play. The reasons behind this choice go beyond my personal involvement and familiarity of the group, although having such accessibility to the group's materials and people has certainly proven to be an advantage. The MIT Assassins' Guild is highly prolific in the production of games; about a dozen new games are created and played every year, a remarkable number in the field of Live-Action Roleplaying. This group maintains an extensive digital archive of game rules and compendia, which is a valuable resource for source material research. It is also active in refining tools that aid game designers in the implementation of their games. These tools, as we shall see, reinforce existing motifs and tendencies in game design just as much as they intend to accelerate the creation of new games. There is also a significant overlap between the game designers and the game players in the group, which offers an intriguing insight on the question of reception. Most of the prolific designers are also frequent players and the majority of the players who have been involved with the Guild for more than two years have been involved in the design or management of at least one game.

Furthermore, members of the MIT Assassins' Guild actively discuss mechanics design, often conducting thought-experiments regarding possible variants and alternatives to game mechanics from previous games. Some games are designed specifically for the purposes of testing new ideas and nearly all Guild games put a twist on established game mechanics for the purposes of experimentation. This process of continual iteration and variation produces a wealth of alternative approaches to game design. The subtle differences in these approaches reveal the creative tensions that drive the effort of game design in the MIT Assassins' Guild, and this thesis takes close looks at the reasons why those tensions exist and at some of the more interesting results produced by the confluence of those tensions.

My approach includes textual analysis of MIT Assassins' Guild games with an ethnographic angle to examine their game design vocabulary and to develop a better understanding of their game design practices. By including textual analysis, analysis of modes and processes of production and analysis of consumption, supported with sustained observations of the players and interviews with the game designers, this would make the vocabulary and frameworks used by game designers available for the growing number of media designers, media theorists, educators and other academics who may be interested in the properties of games but lack the tools to engage in a discussion of game mechanics.

The transparency of the products and the design process of the MIT Assassins' Guild facilitate this approach by being readily available for analysis. Like digital games, MIT Assassins' Guild games are driven by rules that can rigidly constrain player decisions and guide game progression in an anticipatable manner. This connection has not gone unnoticed by other notables in the discussion of games. Janet Murray has cited the MIT Assassins' Guild in her 1997 book Hamlet on the Holodeck<sup>15</sup> for its innovations and its particular qualities as a roleplaying group in MIT. Other leading figures in contemporary digital game thinking, such as Mark "Mahk" LeBlanc<sup>16</sup>, have credited the MIT Assassins' Guild as being a formative influence on their work.

Infrequent examples from other theorists, game-playing groups or game types are included to give a glimpse of some alternatives to the solutions arrived at by the MIT Assassins' Guild when it may not be immediately obvious that alternatives exist. These examples are not meant to demonstrate the full scope of possible solutions for a given issue in game design. Comparisons with material and practices outside of the Guild are intended to highlight the reasons behind the specific implementation of mechanics in MIT Assassins' Guild games, using the Guild's own terminology whenever possible.

It is possible to tease out broad tendencies in directions of game mechanic evolution over several years of documented games by the MIT Assassins' Guild. However, in a creative landscape of continual iteration, few of the alternative approaches mentioned above could

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<sup>15</sup> Murray, J. (1997) Hamlet on the Holodeck. New York: Free Press.

<sup>16</sup> LeBlanc, M. (2003) "Game Design and Tuning Workshop", Game Developers Conference, San Jose, CA.

be reasonably understood to be definitive. The primary exception to this rule comes in the form of games that are frequently cited by the game designers as being significant in the evolution of game design. The names of games such as *Antartica*<sup>17</sup>, *Murder on the Starlight Express*<sup>18</sup> and *Reality Check III*<sup>19</sup> frequently arise in discussion with game designers of the MIT Assassins' Guild because of their role in the introduction or the refining of game mechanics and concepts. Just as important (and much more memorable) are the games remembered to have catastrophic interactions of mechanics such as *Maelstrom*<sup>20</sup>, *From Dusk to Dawn*<sup>21</sup>, *Nanopunk: Tranquility Base*<sup>22</sup> and *Spin Cycle*<sup>23</sup>. References to past games in this thesis generally highlight games that the designers cite with regularity, which are important for understanding how the designers themselves see aspects of these games as being significant in their current context of game design. Note that there are also references to games that I have authored for the purposes of testing ideas that emerged from the preparation of this thesis. This is mostly due to personal familiarity with the material and the details of implementation; these references do not imply that my games have had nearly as much impact in game design practices as those

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<sup>17</sup> Rousculp M, Hererra D, Moore M. (Summer 1994) *Antartica*. Cambridge, MA. Credited with starting the SIK genre of games.

<sup>18</sup> Catelli J, Hope C, Oh D, Zane F. (1991-1994) *Murder of the Starlight Express*. Cambridge, MA. The first one-night Guild game.

<sup>19</sup> Clary K, Litwack P, Martin N. (Fall 2001) *Reality Check III: Dinner at the Schloss Himmelbrand*. Popularized the “Modified Darkwater” combat system with stealth attacks.

<sup>20</sup> Beal J, Chung J, Clary K, Lamming D, Pittman P. (Fall 1998) *Maelstrom*. Cambridge, MA.

<sup>21</sup> Cho D, Maessen J, Provenzano C. (Spring 1997) *From Dusk to Dawn*. Cambridge, MA.

<sup>22</sup> Beal J, Emery G, DeLucas L. (Spring 1999) *Nanopunk: Tranquility Base*. Cambridge, MA.

<sup>23</sup> Gamache P, Genstein S, McAfee M. (Spring 1998) *Spin Cycle*. Cambridge, MA.

mentioned above. As for their actual impact, only time will tell; I am in no position to make this assessment at this time of writing.

Although the plurality of the games designed and played by the MIT Assassins' Guild fit a genre of gaming known to the larger Live-Action Roleplaying Community as "Assassin," the fact remains that a large number of games played by the Guild do not fit easily within that genre. The descriptor "Guild game" is a blanket term to describe all games that are both run and played within the MIT Assassins' Guild. It is a fairly inclusive term that is laden with some assumptions about the logistical circumstances of the game, the attitude towards play and the demographic of the players. Not only is this a more useful catchall term than "Assassin game," it is also a phrase used by members of the Guild themselves. As we will later examine, the phrase "Guild game" places surprisingly few restrictions on the setting of the game or the requirements for specific mechanics, although peer pressure among Guild game designers and players produces unwritten expectations that must be acknowledged by the designers.

This is neither a how-to guide for writing a good Guild game nor a glimpse into "the ultimate Guild game." The rhetoric used within the community of the MIT Assassins' Guild has a tendency to imply that enduring generalizations and rules-of-thumb are all directions in the trajectory of an "übergame" that would be all things for all players. Even experienced Guild game designers who openly contradict this assumption have a tendency to lapse into vocabulary that implies finality. For instance, the clause "a good Guild game must..." commonly rears its head in conversations with Guild game

designers, suggesting that the accumulation of enough “musts” would yield “a good Guild game,” oddly pulling a discussion of Guild game mechanics into the direction of genre theory. In personal discussions, however, most Guild game designers readily accept that different designers will produce very different games, simply as a result of different individuals having different strengths in game design. Furthermore, a vocal proportion of Guild players openly defend their desire to play many different types of games, an opinion that reflects an understanding that among the selection of Guild games available to players, many of them can be markedly different while being just as enjoyable. Both the inconsistency in game designers and the palate of game players indicate that a guide for writing a uniformly “good” Guild game would be a waste of time.

### My Point of View

I have enjoyed an extended association with the MIT Assassins’ Guild, playing and authoring games for the purpose of this thesis, making a number of friends along the way.

I have been an active member of the MIT Assassins’ Guild for three years as of the writing of this thesis. Over this time, I have participated in twenty Guild games as a player and implemented five Guild games as a game designer. I was elected to take charge of the treasury of the MIT Assassins’ Guild for two full years and headed the Ides of March game-writing workshop in 2002. I have also designed and implemented a game for the Live Action Roleplayers Association’s annual roleplaying convention in 2003, *Intercon C*.

These are extremely poor qualifications for an impartial observer of the Guild but they do give you an idea of the experience that I have gathered as a participant observer. The material in this thesis is an analysis of opinions collected while working closely with many members of the MIT Assassins' Guild, having engaged in long, often late-night discussions with players and designers and having observed the interactions among the members of the Guild and other affiliated parties over the past couple of years. Like all opinions, there are biases inherent in this text; I have tried to make these biases explicit whenever possible to put them in a proper perspective. It is my hope that the reader will be able to recognize these biases as reflecting the state of the craft of the MIT Assassins' Guild at the time of writing and benefit from my extended engagement with the continuing endeavor of Guild game design.

If not, to quote the motto of the MIT Assassins' Guild: "To Err is Human, To Forgive Is Not Our Policy." I'll be waiting down the hall with a disc gun.

# A Little History

*“No shit, there I was, pinned down by a deadly hail of enemy gunfire... with nothing between us except a roll of duct tape and a box of Frosted Dutch Apple Pop-Tarts™ — in their original foil wrapping.” — J. Mike Hammond, 1987*

Before we plunge headlong into a discussion of the design considerations used by the MIT Assassins’ Guild, it might be useful to list a little background on the live-action genre of roleplaying games, the game of Assassin, the history of the MIT Assassins’ Guild and the context in which games are played in the Guild. This chapter also describes my personal involvement with the Guild and some of the projects that I was involved in.

## Wargaming: The Forebear of Roleplaying

The origins of roleplaying games as we know them today go back to the practice of wargaming: simulations for military strategists to assess tactics and their ability to command without the actual costs of armed conflict. Chess, of course, can be understood as a highly abstract wargame simulating the battle of two evenly matched forces over even terrain. The Chinese, Indian, Persian and Italian precursors to modern western chess have genealogies that may date as far back as 200BC, and there have been many efforts to adapt the rules of chess to reflect the growing complexities of warfare. In 1780, the Master of the Pages for the Duke of Brunswick developed a sprawling chess variant that involved 1666 squares of varying terrain with pieces representing artillery, infantry and cavalry units. Henry Michael Temple developed a variant of chess in 1899 named *Kriegspiel*, literally, “war play.”

However, the Napoleonic wars spurred the development of a different kind of wargame for officer training and strategic planning, also referred to as *Kriegspiel*. The Prussian army adopted Lieutenant von Reisswitz's 1:8000 scale wargame as a standard training tool in 1824, assembling elaborate books of rules for determining the results of a variety of different military decisions over a range of terrains and circumstances<sup>24</sup>. Although General von Verdy du Vernois replaced the books with qualitative consultations in 1870, he kept many of Reisswitz's fundamentals. The order of play codified the processes of decision-making for a two-map format (one for each opposing strategist) and emphasized the role of the umpire, usually a senior military officer. Effective knowledge about the movement and capabilities of different units was the key to winning a game of *Kriegspiel*. Finally, even though probabilities were weighted using mathematical tables or judgments of the umpire, the game relied on dice to determine the consequences of combat.

Wargaming became mainstream recreation in the early 1900s in England and Europe, increasingly associated with die-casting technologies of the day, allowing military units to be represented by detailed miniatures. H.G. Wells published Little Wars in 1913, an attempt at developing a "vivid and inspiring *Kriegspiel*, in which the element of the umpire would be reduced to a minimum."<sup>25</sup> This challenge was met by rigid yet simple rule sets that allowed young players to strategize within a limited range of choices. Little

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<sup>24</sup> Griffith, P. (1980) Napoleonic Wargaming for Fun. London: Ward Lock.

<sup>25</sup> Wells, H.G. (1913, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition) Little wars: A game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girls who like boys' games and books : with an appendix on kriegspiel. New York: Da Capo Press. First Ed: London: F. Palmer.

Wars also encouraged players “to set up a few obstacles on the floor, volumes of the British Encyclopedia and so forth, to make a Country,” an evocative and accessible description of a game in which children turned their playroom floors into battlegrounds, placed toy soldiers and knocked them down with the aid of spring breechloader guns. Wells’ own writings hint at the popularity of wargaming among his adult contemporaries, indicating that wargaming was not a merely a youth pastime in the early twentieth century.

In the 1950s, recreational wargames began to adopt less expensive and less expensive requirements by borrowing principles from board game formats that made the Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley household names in the preceding decades. Pioneering companies such as Avalon Hill and Simulations Publications, Inc. led the way in “tabletop wargaming” but were quickly joined by other competitors in the late 50s and the 60s. As a side effect, this established distribution channels that would facilitate the rapid popularization of roleplaying games in the 70s.

### The Breakthrough: Dungeons & Dragons

Wargaming with miniatures has remained a visible genre of gaming in its own right, particularly in the United Kingdom. However, in 1973, a small company known as Tactical Studies Rules published an “Adult Fantasy Role-Playing Game” based on a variant of the rules of Chainmail, one of their own medieval miniatures wargames.

Assembled by Gary Gygax, Dungeons & Dragons<sup>26</sup> borrowed heavily from the formats and tables of contemporary wargaming, adding descriptive elements that alluded to the fantasy motifs established by J.R.R. Tolkien, which had gained popularity across college campuses in the 1960s. Known in gaming circles as simply “D&D,” the game moved away from realistic military strategy and focused on the activities of a small group of distinct individuals traversing dungeons designed by the umpire, who was elevated to the lofty title of “Dungeon Master”. D&D also emphasized an open-ended attitude that “offered no definitive way to win<sup>27</sup>,” a stark contrast with the typically goal-orientated trends of wargaming. In D&D, players were no longer nameless strategists directing the ebbs and flows of military forces on the theatre of battle; instead, they took on alternate personas that lived only on graph paper and “gained experience” by slaying subterranean monsters.

Despite its departure from these elements of wargaming, gaming audiences took to D&D’s innovations with enthusiasm. In 1979, evidence of D&D’s influence could be found in the new releases of pioneering computer roleplaying games such as Zork, Temple of Apshai, Akalabeth and the very first online Multi-User Dungeon (MUD). Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, also published in that year, has superseded D&D in prominence. Its copious rules, tables, clarifications and supplements has spawned an

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<sup>26</sup> Gygax, G. and Arneson, D. (1974) Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures. Lake Geneva, Tactical Studies Rules.

<sup>27</sup> Sones, B.E. (2001) Here There Be Dragons. Computer Games Online. <http://www.cgonline.com/features/011218-f1-f1.html>

entire format of gaming literature and publishing that has outpaced wargaming in popularity and market sales in many developed countries.

Of particular note is the roleplaying game's focus on the individual. Although players can opt to control multiple characters in the game, creating a single character extremely complex. Most players prefer to micro-manage and reuse a single character design. Over many sequential games, also known as "campaigns," players form a personal attachment with their character, resulting in an interesting a player-character dichotomy. During a game, the player may be calculating numbers or crossing out checkboxes on a sheet of paper but the character is in a dank dungeon performing daring and dangerous deeds. Although this cognitive dissonance does not cripple game play (as evidenced by the bestselling nature of D&D and its kin), this tension is important for understanding the appeal of Live-Action Roleplaying.

Most wargamers never expect to find themselves in a position to control real troops unless they happen to be military personnel. In a roleplaying game, however, characters often perform tasks that the players could do perfectly well. The difference between two characters in an adventuring party talking to each other or two players chatting across a table is slight. If players need to imagine the environment that surrounds their characters in order to play a tabletop roleplaying game, it does not take much more effort to imagine that same environment surrounding the player. Even the issue of providing the right backdrop can be addressed by moving the game from an indoor table to a forest or a building basement. In fact, with enough space and planning, Dungeon Masters could use

real spaces to represent the architecture of the game world, making issues between players such as line-of-sight and conversation as simple as whispering to somebody around a corner.

In 1979, a student from the University of Michigan disappeared and the press reported that he played “live D&D” in the university steam tunnels. Although investigations later showed that his disappearance had nothing to do with Dungeons & Dragons or roleplaying, Rona Jaffe published a work of fiction named “Mazes and Monsters” (later adapted into a film) in 1981 that developed this premise. This media attention, coupled with the proliferation of new roleplaying games in 1979, probably influenced the rapid appearance of a number of live-action roleplaying groups across the United States over the next five years.<sup>28</sup>

## Live-Action Roleplaying Organizations

Before roleplaying arrived on the scene, however, the concept of live-action “let’s pretend” already existed in the public mind. Theatre, after all, has actors playing pretend roles on a live stage. Improv theatre entered the American mainstream in the early 1950s when Paul Sills and David Shepherd adapted a theatrical exercise developed by Viola Spolin, a recreational director working with immigrant children in neighborhood theatre in Chicago. A thespian in England’s Royal Court Theatres named Keith Johnstone began an “impro” movement known as Theatresports at about the same time. Corporate

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<sup>28</sup> Olmstead-Dean, G. (1998) Theatre Style Live Roleplaying Events. Cthulhu Live. <http://www.geocities.com/PSTproductions/index.html>

business trainees, psychologists and historical re-enactment groups have used and continue to use the assumption of live-action roles for a variety of simulative purposes.

In 1966, “a group of science fiction and fantasy fans<sup>29</sup>” in Berkeley, CA organized theme parties in which attendees dressed and acted as if they were in the middle ages. After discovering that there was an enthusiastic audience for these sorts of gatherings, the group named itself the Society for Creative Anachronism and spawned multiple chapters across the country, orchestrating events that allowed participants to engage in a variety of medieval activities, from costuming to dancing to fencing to cooking.

This intersection of SCA activities, college roleplaying gamers and press reports provided fertile ground for the birth of pioneering groups such as the Harvard Society for Interactive Literature (SIL). Despite this group’s turbulent history, its splintering and its reincorporation as the Interactive Literature Foundation in 1988 and later as the Live Action Roleplayers Association in 1999, they are still recognized as an important force in the development and popularization of a variety of live-action roleplaying game formats. Today, one can find mass-market live-action roleplaying rules and scenarios in large bookstores, including the popular How to Host a Murder Party Game series by Wooden Horse Books that has been in publication since 1990.

## The Game of Assassin

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<sup>29</sup> “Mistress Siobhan Medhbh O’Roarke” (1996) Life in the Current Middle Ages, Society for Creative Anachronism. <http://www.sca.org/sca-intro.html>

Unlike SCA activities and improv theatre performances, a large number of Live-Action Roleplaying (LARPing) events specifically call themselves games, emphasizing a unique form of competition. LARP games often feature a postmodern streak where the players are have to scheme against each other, without knowledge about their opponent's true motives or even the identity of their opponents. This is a marked difference compared to D&D, in which multiple players fight against a world designed by the Dungeon Master, or to wargaming, where players usually have some general understanding of each other's objectives.

This style of gaming has its roots in activities such as *Secret Santa* and *Circle of Death*, which are designed to introduce people to each other through friendly competition. Such games require players to perform investigative work; in many cases, players may be given the names of other players and will need to find out who they are and what they look like before they can perform some sort of interaction. For *Secret Santa*, the interaction is often a presentation of a small gift. For *Circle of Death* games, however, players need to shoot their targets with a rubber dart gun or a water pistol.

With the media constantly obsessing over cold-war espionage in the 1980s, the spy-like *Circle of Death* activities became hugely popular in college and high-school campuses. A player that performs a successful "kill" in a *Circle of Death* game obtains the name of his target's target, thus making his or her way around the "circle" until the player has "killed" everybody or has been "killed."

In 1981, Steve Jackson, a well-known designer of roleplaying games and tactical wargames, published a rulebook for a *Circle of Death* game entitled Killer: The Game of Assassination with the tagline “The *live* role-playing game for any number of players.” Jackson’s introduction to the book emphasized the competitive nature of the game and traced the increasing identification of the player with the character from wargaming to tabletop roleplaying to LARPing. The afterword of Killer, written by John William Johnson of Indiana University, described Killer as “a ‘codification’ of an orally transmitted folk game which has been diffusing from one university campus to another for the past fifteen years<sup>30</sup>” and traced the idea of the game back to a short story by Robert Sheckley in 1953 and a film by Carlo Ponti in 1965, although he also mentions 19<sup>th</sup> century examples.

Jackson’s book had a major impact on live-action roleplaying game design. It standardized a set of rules that allowed gamers to host their own games without writing their own. It provided guidelines for organizers and players of Killer games to make variations that would keep the game safe and interesting. Finally, it provided a range of roleplaying scenarios built on top of Killer rules to give characters interesting reasons for taking down their targets.

Today, live-action roleplaying games that rely on “the human hunt” as its core motivation are usually called Assassin games. These games may include political intrigue, historical events, economic wrangling, nonviolent interpersonal relationships or other complexities.

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<sup>30</sup> Jackson, S. (1981, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition) Killer: The Game of Assassination. Austin: Steve Jackson Games.

However, if the game is live-action, involves roleplaying and the central goal of the game is to discover, identify and eliminate one's opposition through simulated violence, the game is probably some variant of Assassin.

LARP games known as "Theater style" have grown out of Assassin games and have overtaken Assassin in popularity. Theater style games feature more open-ended goal definitions, emphasize character motivations and include nonviolent solutions to character conflicts. However, many experienced theater style game designers acknowledge their genre's roots in Assassin and credit the MIT Assassins' Guild as being one of the pioneers of theater style LARPing.

### The MIT Assassins' Guild

The MIT Assassins' Guild was originally an ad-hoc student-run Killer group in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The university officially recognized the MIT Assassins' Guild as a student activity in 1982, in stark contrast with many other college campuses that outlawed Assassin games because of the inconvenience caused to bystanders and the occasional damage to college property. From extensive cross-pollination and rivalry with the SIL group in Harvard, the Guild developed its "Team Killer" games into more complex conspiratorial, political, technological and fantasy motifs, experimenting with the theater style format while protecting the competitive streak of Assassin. Although the SIL no longer exists, the Guild continues this kind of development to the current day with a high level of student and alumni participation. In addition to its theatre style games, the Guild also hosts "Society for Interactive Killing"

games, or SIK games; a tongue-in-cheek name for games that feature a lot of combat and minimal narrative direction or character complexity.

The constitution of the MIT Assassins' Guild requires Guild games to be declared "dead" after they have been hosted a limited number of times<sup>31</sup>. Once "dead," they may never again be run under the auspices of the MIT Assassins' Guild. Other LARP groups or Guild members may host those Guild games elsewhere but many Guild games are specifically designed for the MIT campus. In addition, the Guild is a social gaming group and many Guild game writers are only interested in having their games played by friends in the Guild. As a result, many Guild games are never played after they have been declared "dead."

In contrast, LARP writers in other groups often reuse their games continually, taking their game rules, scenarios and characters from convention to convention, LARPing group to LARPing group. Each session of play presents them with the opportunity to refine their materials. Guild games have few opportunities to do such iterative adjustment. Because of the secretive nature of Guild game roles, players are not encouraged to participate a game more than once, although ex-players often help with errands and administration in later sessions. After two iterations of a thirty-person game, it would be hard to find another thirty Guild members to "fill" another session, and the

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<sup>31</sup> "Unrestrained storytelling and discussion of past games are important to the Guild's social fabric and to its ability to learn. Therefore, each game shall be declared dead (unable to rerun under the auspices of the Guild) within around a year of its first run here, preferably much sooner. This is optional for games that can't be spoiled by storytelling by virtue of lack of secret elements, e.g. some SIK games." [Constitution of the MIT Assassins' Guild, Standing Policy addendum, Fall 2002]

“dead” policy means that game writers cannot wait for the next group of incoming students to fill the roles.

Of course, game writers always apply lessons learnt from previous games by reusing ideas in brand new games. More importantly, a game always has some players who would be planning for their own games, paying attention to game elements that they find enjoyable. Occasionally, this produces a succession of games that share similar concepts in game play, privileging game ideas that players, rather than game writers, find compelling.

Although designers of games that have not yet been declared “dead” are usually careful to keep surprises in their games hidden from members who may have the chance to play the game at a later date, Guild members have little to lose by examining “dead” games in close detail. Thus, members freely plumb the Guild’s archives of more than a hundred game compendia currently stored on MIT’s networked computers. These are digital collections of every piece of text and computer code needed to host those particular Guild games. The archives can be invaluable for new and experienced Guild game designers looking to unearth and adapt old ideas for new games.

In addition to the archives, an alumnus of the Guild keeps a set of “Standard Rules” updated, tracking and recording the most reused rule variants in recent Guild games. Although a few game designers will aim to bring a completely fresh take to Guild games, the Standard Rules are a good reflection of the status quo. To save time and effort, many

GMs (“Game Master,” a more common term than “Dungeon Master” in current roleplaying parlance) use the Standard Rules as a basis for designing the mechanics of their games.

## Development of Guild Game Mechanics

In the Guild, the term “mechanic” refers to a collection of elements that allow players to have specific interactions with other characters or with the world of the game. A character in a science fiction game may need to purchase a thousand tons of an industrial ore by means of an interplanetary stock market in order to succeed in his or her goals. A game mechanic would allow a player to make that purchase within the game world and possibly affect the value of the ore on the stock market, thus influencing the buying decisions of other players. Game mechanics may be defined by the letter of written rules, by denying or providing different information to different players, by various manipulations performed by GMs or computers behind-the-scenes, and by the players arriving at their own interpretations of the rules.

In the MIT Assassins’ Guild, most game mechanics are intended to allow players to achieve their character’s goals. This process often involves the discovery and elimination of their opposition. Many GMs also use mechanics to promote or discourage various kinds of interactions among players to match the circumstances of the setting of the game.

Of course, the effectiveness and complexity of mechanics used in a game will depend heavily on the abilities and the experience of the GM or the group of GMs (known as a “GM team”) developing the game. Guild members laud some GMs’ ability to remember and discuss a large variety of mechanics from previous games. Just as valued, however, is a GM’s ability to balance a variety of tensions in the development of new mechanics, a talent that only comes to light once a GM has written and hosted several games. The following chapters will take a closer look at some of those tensions.

# Feasibility

*“You blew up God...with a rocket launcher?”*

Writing a Guild game is no small matter with respect to effort or time. While several endeavors have produced playable games within an extremely limited amount of time, the truth remains that most games take a GM team several months to author, and design schedules of a year or more both common and recommended by many writers in the Guild. When designing games, GMs need to consider if they are capable of turning their ideas into operable mechanics and if they can support those mechanics during the game. To better understand this, we first need to look at a typical schedule of game development.

## The Phases of Game Design and Implementation

A game goes through many stages of construction from concept to implementation. The initial “idea” stage usually begins with one or two GMs who may have some interesting concept of a setting or a mechanic with which they would like to use in a game. The next step may involve the recruitment of additional GMs interested in working with those ideas, thus bringing additional skills to the GM team. From there, an extensive preproduction phase begins, with GM teams meeting in meetings to flesh out the concept into a system of mechanics, characters, spaces and a useable scenario.

GM teams often send emails to mailing lists to inform potential players that a game is in the works. The emails solicit for more ideas from players with the understanding that the

GM team is neither required to accept any of the suggestions nor to ensure that the player who came up with the suggestion would necessarily be in a position to take advantage of the idea during the game. This is known as a “call for pre-applications,” or “preapps.” Preapps are useful tools for GM teams to gauge the interest of potential players and to construct game plots and mechanics that would make the experience more enjoyable for players. Given that the players making the suggestions are not privy to all of the game information that is shared among the GMs, the GMs must usually perform some amount of dexterous manipulation on the suggestions before it fits into the greater outline of the game. However, aside for a nonbinding advertising blurb, the GM team has not produced any text or data that would be eventually seen or read by a player in the game. Thus, integrating such ideas or making changes to the game is still a feasible proposition.

“Sheet writing” is the actual stage when the GM team turns concepts into readable prose and tables for use by the players. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology has a computer-literate population so most of this work occurs in the digital realm, often incorporating the use of coding tools developed by members of the MIT Assassins’ Guild. The produce of this endeavor usually consists of many kilobytes of page-description code that can be run through software to produce reams of hardcopy. Any actual hardcopy produced during sheet writing are merely samples to help members of the GM team vet each other’s material. “Sanity checking” or “san-checking” combines proofreading, comparisons with notes from the preproduction phase and cross checking among the written rules to find overlooked loopholes or potentially unfortunate interactions of mechanics. Better-organized GM teams set an early deadline for sheet

writing to allow san-checking to occur with all the drafted sheets in hand, although GMs understand that the point of san-checking is to make meaningful revisions to the sheets.

At the beginning of each school semester, Guild games must be scheduled with the elected board of representatives of the MIT Assassins' Guild known as the High Council. As a result, many games are placed on the semester's schedule before they have completed sheet writing, creating a firm deadline for the GM team in the middle of development. The actual participation and execution of a game is known as a "run," a term borrowed from computer software. The GM team sends out a call for applications<sup>32</sup> over email as the run date of the game (also known as "game-start") nears within two or three weeks. These "apps" are itemized email forms that players who wish to participate must fill out to provide specific information to the GMs. The appendix includes an app used for one of my games.

This information is important for "casting," when GMs allocate characters to the players according to their preferences. Armed with the knowledge that specific players will be performing as specific game characters, some GM teams may make further changes to sheets to better fit the preferences of the players. Some GM teams, however, would still producing new sheets at this stage and such accommodations for the players could be trivial (incorporating them into sheets that are still being written), problematic (propagating changes through several sheets that have already been written) or low-

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<sup>32</sup> GM teams still sending out calls for preapps a month before game-start often have difficulty completing their game writing before game-start.

priority (devoting full effort to completing unfinished sheets instead of making changes to sheets that are nominally complete).

“Production” or “prod” is the next phase of the game production schedule. This involves the systematic rendering and printing of all the page-description code into readable hardcopy, customized for each individual player. Some sheets need to be cut up into strips to reduce paper waste or stapled shut to restrict information to players (see the section on Information). The strips and sheets are placed in separate manila envelopes for each player in preparation for handout.

Players may be able to access digital copies of rules or general information about the game over the Internet but most players only receive actual information about their character from a session known as “handout.” Occurring a few days before game-start, GMs meet with the players in a classroom and explain the rules of the game, clarifying some of the more complicated mechanics and answering questions from the players. The envelopes are then given to the corresponding players. GM teams usually intend to have all sheets completed by prod and handout, but many GMs (myself included) fail to meet this deadline. These GMs will tell players at handout that their packets may lack some information that would be made available before game-start.

Between handout and game-start, GMs will have to “setup game-space,” where they print and post paper signs on walls throughout the MIT campus to indicate the geographical limits or significant areas of the game. Some games include puzzles that require the

discovery of concealed strips of paper or colored adhesive dots near specific locations, and those must also be in place before game-start. Typically, loose props and contrivances that may interfere with daytime classes are added to game-space classrooms in the hour before game-start. Many GM teams allow the game to start before they have finished setup if they know that a few missing items would have minimal impact on the game.

### Tools of the Trade

The students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology tend to devise technological solutions to assist game writing. Suites of page-description coding tools make the printed sheets presentable but they also attempt to address a variety of problems in the typical schedule of game development. Sheet writing begins long before casting and produces a great deal of prose to inform a player about his or her affiliations with other characters in the game. That preceding sentence already hints at one problem. When writing the sheets, GMs do not necessarily know they will cast a male or female player as a specific character. Requiring characters to be specific genders may unnecessarily reduce flexibility in casting, although it may be appropriate for some characters. While it is possible to cast a player as a character of the opposite sex, not many players enjoy being “cross-cast.” Others might simply perform poorly as cross-cast characters. If GMs wish to set the gender of the character according to the player, the appellation of the character may need to change if the GMs do not use gender-neutral names.

At the time of writing, there are two suites of coding tools used extensively by GMs in the MIT Assassins' Guild. Both use a combination of the Perl scripting language and the LaTeX page-description language and both offer similar functionality. For instance, both allow GMs to write sheets using "macros," which allow GMs to change information in one digital document and have that information propagate through all of the sheets. In this way, GMs can write sheets using macros that automatically appear as the appropriate "he" or "she" during prod.

With such tools, certain tasks in sheet writing can move around in the typical game development schedule. Assigning names to characters, for instance, can be done early or late in sheet writing. In many cases, it requires fewer keystrokes for GMs to use macros in their sheets instead of spelling out full names.

Furthermore, these tool suites have more powerful macros that need only a minimal set of parameters to produce elaborate, formatted, double-sided cards, slips and wall signs. GMs know that they can easily distribute these duplicable properties among characters, so they do not have to worry about their assignment in the process of writing the character's sheets. By making simple changes to the appropriate macros, GMs expect that the corresponding cards and slips will appear in their correct quantities together with the character's sheet during prod, arranged in a manner that will simplify the player's or the GM's task of cutting them out.

This sort of simplification, however, has a visible effect on game design. When it is easy to create elaborate, multifunctional, page-set printed resources for games by sticking with the tools at hand, there is less incentive to find different ways to achieve similar goals. With the multi-month development schedules required to perform the minimum of work for games of typical complexity, any option that saves time is understandably welcome. As a result, many GM teams will use the tool suites without spending much time discussing or rethinking the functions that the tool suites already perform so well. In fact, some GM teams will choose to twist their mechanics to fit the generic functionality of the tool suites to avoid spending too much time on producing custom versions of the tools.

For example, few GM teams deem it necessary to change the format of wall signs for every game. Other LARP groups such as Virginia Interactive Arts pride themselves on having distinctive visual designs for their printed materials. The MIT Assassins' Guild places relatively little value on printed visual aesthetics and the standard formats in *Template* and *GameTeX* seem to be “good enough” for most purposes of the MIT Assassins' Guild. Because the desire of Guild GMs to speed up development usually overrides their desire to produce visually elaborate layouts, wall signs look strikingly similar from game to game. One could argue that the tension of feasibility (freeing up time to finish game development) has no competing tension in the context of most Guild games.

Conversely, the availability of multiple tool suites means that GM teams at least have to choose a suite that would better serve their purposes. *Template*, maintained by Jamie

Morris, is the older and better documented of the two, whereas *GameTeX*, maintained by V. Ken Clary, trades power for compact code and easy readability. The high level of computer literacy in the MIT Assassins' Guild and easy access to the alumni developers of the tool suites ensure that any GM team that wishes to produce complex variations of the existing tools would have the means to do so, given enough time. The desire of some GMs to experiment makes some page-description formats perpetually fair game for redesign. Cinematic combat cards have witnessed a bewildering number of variations over numerous games, despite the fact that they involve some of the most complex code in either suite.

### Heroic Attempts at Efficient Game Writing

The GM team of *Berkeley* (2001), a one-night 1960s spy game written by Jake Beal, Peter Litwack, Nick Martin and Richard Tibbetts, took particular pride at being able to move from concept to game-start within two weeks, a situation that arose from the need to fill a weekend slot in the schedule to replace another scheduled game that failed to complete development. The result was a formulaic one-night spy game that fulfilled most expectations of the genre by borrowing extensively from tried-and-true ideas from previous games. Despite the scenario of the game (a Californian college campus in the 1960s) being an odd fit for the major interactions within the game (conspiracies conducting espionage over an assortment of generic technological artifacts), most of the players were quick to overlook its shortcomings and lack of innovation due to its miraculously short period of design and production.

SIK games are also infamous for their short production times, although a closer look at the actual processes involved in SIK game design reveals that most SIK games are imagined, discussed and bounced about as a concept long before they begin any writing. Most SIK games feature exceedingly brief rules that take little time to write and are easily translated from concept to prose. Players often receive sheets duplicated among all their teammates, further reducing production time. The brevity of SIK games is a trait favored by fans and designers of the SIK genre of gaming. Players expect to spend little time reading their sheets, game designers respond by writing small amounts of text and restricting the sheet content to the bare essentials.

Most of the time-consuming work happens at the concept stage. Because of the lack of any hardcopy or actual data produced in the concept stage, combined with the ability of most SIK game writers to maintain several simultaneous game concepts in their heads at a time, many designers assume good SIK games can be written in two or three weeks, forgetting about the invisible preproduction processes involved in streamlining high-combat games.

GM teams of most other kinds of Guild games, however, include this concept-processing time in their estimated schedules and realistically schedule game-start many months away from the date they succeed in assembling their GM team. Some forward-looking GMs roll the time required to form a GM team with the necessary skills into their time estimates, knowing that recruiting a GM team can be easier with an expected run-date in mind. The multi-month writing periods also compensate for the fact that most GMs are

either students or have full-time jobs and can only spend a fraction of their time on the writing of a game. Some GM teams with a majority of student members deliberately include the summer session into their writing schedules to take advantage of the increased student-hours available for writing, although many GM teams have found that a student's productivity does not necessarily increase during vacation time.

### Abstracting Character Actions for Feasibility

Game writing schedules emerge as a tension in mechanics design when game effects that would be otherwise be desirable might require too much preparation time. Even simple game mechanics may not be worth writing up for games that do not call for that sort of functionality. If there are no items that can influence the course of the game, for instance, it is a waste of time to write rules for searching other characters. If there is absolutely no way to provide a specific kind of functionality for a game within the limited time, money or technical ability of a GM team, it stands to reason that the function should be excluded from the game design.

However, certain game settings and scenarios rely on the existence of an interaction among characters that is hard to represent. A game about economic diplomacy would certainly be awkward without any means of negotiating with tradable currencies. Yet, economies can be notoriously difficult systems to incorporate and balance for the purposes of a game. It may take too long to write all the rules necessary for elaborate economic transactions or the GMs may not have the necessary math skills or experience to balance a realistic, playable economy among the characters.

Usually, one way to implement a difficult game mechanic is to abstract and simplify aspects of the game setting until the mechanics become feasible for writing. Other tensions then begin to compete. Will the activity of the players become too abstract so as to render it meaningless? Will players be able to effectively strategize at this level of simplification? Can the mechanic be altered reduce its demands on GM time while satisfactorily fulfilling other reasons for its existence?

As an example, some detective or archaeological games require characters to pursue sequential interactions with other characters in the world and a long, potentially dangerous line of clues to discover a hidden secret. This activity needs to fill most of the time available in the game so that the player does not run out of things to do before the end of game. It may be impossible to prepare all the books and physical items that a player needs to examine to discover the right clue or have thirty other bit parts hanging around to feed information to the players at precisely the right time. Possible simplifications might include inserting clues into real books, adding time delays so that players take more time to solve fewer clues, or reusing the same set of clues for every character so that only one line of clues needs to be prepared.

Abstractions usually map the character's time and resource-intensive endeavor onto a different activity that requires less preparation on the part of the GMs. Some GM teams in the Guild favor "riddle trails" as a generic approach for the example above. A player needs to find an obscure line of text that appears in some public space on the MIT

campus and locate a small colored dot near the text. The dot is labeled with the initials of the name of the game and a unique serial number that corresponds to the clue. Finding the dot allows the player to open a stapled slip and read the next obscure line of text, and the trail continues. Alternatives have included picture trails (finding out where certain photographs were taken) or puzzle trails (solving mathematical or pen-and-paper puzzles that reveal the location of the dot).

“Dot hunts” have been used to represent the character town trying to find reclusive informants or secret panels. While sharing much of the same joys as a scavenger or treasure hunt, some dot hunts run the risk of being so abstract and disconnected from the actions of the character that players lose their engagement with the activity. However, the dot hunt does preserve some very important characteristics of the hunt for information. Both the character and the player are moving around in space, away from the majority of game. Often they will travel alone and run the risk of being distracted by the hunt, providing a wealth of ambush opportunities for other players. Furthermore, the dot hunt provides players with unequivocal direction for their subsequent steps on their trail, although false-negatives are one of the primary flaws of the dot hunt<sup>33</sup>. The chief benefits of the dot hunt, however, come from its low preparatory demands on the part of the GM team. It takes little time to write and can easily generate several hours worth of player activity. Furthermore, interesting player interactions can be stimulated by the dot hunt when multiple players realize that they share the same trail.

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<sup>33</sup> Little adhesive colored dots have a tendency to fall off a wall and get swept by janitorial staff, which may lead players to believe that they are looking at the wrong place even if they find the correct solution to the riddle.

## Negotiating Game-space

Because most Guild games use multiple classrooms on the MIT campus, the sheets often refer to specific room numbers so that players can find important locations in game-space. MIT's Department of Facilities has its own schedule for room reservations and most GM teams begin their sheet writing before they know the rooms that will be allocated for their use in the game. Just as it is with the names of characters, it is easy to insert the appropriate room numbers into macros so that the correct information will appear on the sheets during prod.

However, this means that most GM teams have little certainty regarding the layout of game-space when they are balancing their game mechanics. In Live-Action Roleplaying, the arrangement of important spaces in the game is vital for the purposes of controlling the pace of game. Players cannot interact with other players or game items if they fail to locate them: poor, if a player needs to find multiple people or things to further his or her quest; excellent, if the player is on the run.

Most GM teams construct mechanics with an idealized game-space in mind, combining their knowledge of the geography of the MIT campus and their experience with past allocations by the Department of Facilities. However, GM teams know that they must design their mechanics with sufficient flexibility in room allocation. If they cannot get the rooms that they want, their mechanics must still be playable with the rooms that they get.

The fact that room numbers are so easily inserted into the sheets is one less reason for Guild games to seek room reservations far in advance. Most GM teams have to avoid designing mechanics that hinge on the availability of specific rooms on campus. Of course, there are exceptions. Some GM teams have been known to ask for their games to be scheduled contingent on the availability of specific rooms. Other GMs design games that operate entirely in corridors, which do not need to be reserved. SIK games are particularly notable in this latter respect<sup>34</sup>.

Even “ideal” rooms and game-spaces have their problems. The third floor of the computer-science buildings in MIT features four large, interconnected, air-conditioned rooms with multiple entrances that are excellent for a variety of town-square-like purposes. There is also a large, flat, unwaxed space in the middle that has good illumination and long lines-of-sight, which are perfect for ranged combat. However, this also makes the space attractive for a variety of non-Guild purposes. Games in that space often feature peculiar collisions with practicing couples of ballroom dancers from another MIT student group. Similar problems arise with games that arrange their important spaces near corridors of high non-player foot traffic. Even if the layout of the rooms is ideal, such spaces have their drawbacks due to unwanted intrusions of reality on foot.

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<sup>34</sup> Of course, such games are sometimes tripped up (sic) when the Department of Facilities schedules floor waxing in corridors that they believe to be unused for the night. This is actually a game element in Dave Lebling’s “The Lurking Horror,” a computer adventure game published by Infocom in 1987 that is set in a university oddly similar to MIT.

## In-game Workload

Most of the examples so far involve considerations of GM workload in preparation for the game. However, some mechanics could be considered unfeasible because of the demands that they place on the GM or the player *during* the game. Some games allow GMs to confirm the reliability of information that they may have gathered on other characters, a mechanic introduced in *Maelstrom* (1998) by Jake Beal, Jennifer Chung, Ken Clary, Dudley Lamming and Patrick Pittman. This requires GMs to be available to provide information that will not contradict information provided by other GMs.

A number of games have similar mechanics that vary with the expected response time for such “background checks.” *Maelstrom* required these requests to be sent via email, which has an assumed time delay and allowed GMs to confer and respond to requests overnight. Other games, such as my own *Tenchi Muyo: The Night Before the Carnival* (2001), required GMs to frequent check and respond to new requests in envelopes in several different locations around campus. This particular implementation took GMs away from their important role as game referees and players became increasingly disappointed at the lack of timely information.

Excessively time-intensive mechanics are known as being “hosing,” borrowing from the MIT metaphor of “drinking from a fire hose.” The above example features a “GM-hosing” mechanic, where GMs do too much to achieve minimal results. The same term is used for mechanics that make players perform tasks that require excessive time or effort to make any sort of headway towards their goals. Usually, hosing mechanics make

players feel that they have to spend the majority of game time attending to some uninteresting task, drawing them away from other activities that they may consider more interesting or entertaining but less crucial to their character's success. Alternatively, a hosing mechanic may require a player to devote excessive mental energies to memorization or calculation to deal with quick-response situations such as combat, making it difficult or dangerous for the player to concentrate on other things in the game.

Note that GMs often aim to design mechanics that require the continual (but not continuous) involvement of the player throughout the game. The extreme opposite of a hosing mechanic is a trivial mechanic that requires a minimum of effort, time and decision-making on the part of the player. Designing these mechanics may also be a waste of time on the part of the GMs, as their inclusion into a game generates relatively little player activity and interest. GM teams want to make sure that the time, concentration and exertion required for a player to complete his or her goals are paced to provide players with interesting activities throughout the duration of a game: not too little, not too much, and not too boring.

### Coin Flipping and Decking

Time-consuming mechanics often rear their head in Guild games in the form of tests of probability. A number of common Guild mechanics use the construction of specific poker hands from a deck of cards or the flipping of coins as a generalized abstraction of complex activities, boiling success or failure down to a matter of probability. Properly

balanced, “decking” and coin flipping mechanics can pose a variety of interesting challenges for players.

A number of games use poker decks to represent the activity of computer hacking. By drawing and rejecting cards from the deck in a manner akin to draw poker, players make decisions with every hand that could accelerate or decelerate their progress. Decks may also include a variable number of jokers that will boost the likelihood of forming difficult poker hands, turning decks with multiple jokers into a valuable, tradable commodity.

Coin flips have their own properties; the equipment needed for the mechanic is highly portable (a coin), falling coins risk alerting nearby players of activity, and the physical act of flipping requires a certain degree of hand dexterity. By varying the number of heads required, a coin-flipping mechanic can impose different time requirements for different characters involved in the same activity. Coin flipping has seen significant use in games as an analog for character actions that necessarily feature some element of randomness, such as lock picking.

Probability tests are hardly new to roleplaying games. Tabletop roleplaying games often use many different kinds of dice to assess the probabilistic success or failure of a variety of character actions. However, unlike simple rolls of dice, coin flipping and decking mechanics attempt to reflect the time and effort involved in character activities through the physical actions of the player.

Most difficulties with probability tests in live-action roleplaying games emerge from the real-time property of these games. Many Guild games permit probability tests to be repeated in the case of failure, ensuring that a string of unlucky draws or flips will not completely deny players success in their goals. However, if players cannot find alternatives for achieving their goals, many players will interpret this loophole as a requirement for them to invest as much time as necessary in order to produce a successful test<sup>35</sup>. If the odds are low, probability tests can easily turn into tedious, repetitive, frustrating, extended affairs. Flipping two heads in a row takes a few seconds; flipping ten heads requires an inordinate number of attempts. Such tests already hamper mobility, as dealing cards or flipping coins can be difficult when one is on the move. If players are not permitted to communicate with others while performing the probability test, the mechanic effectively isolates a player while he or she performs the task.

Most games that use probability tests will weight the odds according to the abilities of the characters. A master thief might only need two heads in a row where a common thief might need five in order to open a door. GMs may believe that if the odds are sufficiently and visibly stacked against players, players may decide that certain tests would not be worth attempting. In practice, however, this assumption only operates in situations where players cannot make endless attempts at beating the odds. Multiple routes to goal achievement combined with artificial limits, such as significant time delays between

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<sup>35</sup> A running joke in the MIT Assassins' Guild goes: "If a GM writes it down, players will do it." An appropriate addition for the discussion at hand may be: "...over and over again."

tests, can discourage “brute-forcing” of the probability test, thus turning a player-hosing mechanic back into a reasonable choice for the player

In games where probability tests tend to represent a clandestine activity such as lock picking, structuring the game space to reduce the number of opportunities for players to be alone often serves as sufficient disincentive. However, in this regard, many players often face a conflict between the player’s reality and the character’s reality. While characters may believe that lock picking is a suspicious activity, players may consider lock picking to be a common game activity and would avoid interfering when they see coins being flipped. Alternatively, when the majority of players ally themselves into a single group to aggregate their power and moral authority, members of the group often get away with activities that characters in the game world would never be allowed to do. This process is known as “forming a mob” and it is often an extremely effective, albeit unrealistic way for some players to achieve their goals. However, players who cannot join the group because of restrictions in their sheets may find themselves cut out of many of the proceedings of the game, resulting in a poor gaming experience.

### Who Broke the Mechanic?

The tension of feasibility concentrates on the logistical issues of mechanic design in Guild games. Even if they know that they can implement a mechanic, however, experienced GMs spend a lot of time and effort ensuring that their mechanics adequately serve the function of providing and encouraging a range of desirable interactions in the game. The word “broken” describes any poorly executed mechanic or suite of mechanics

that results in a noticeable combination of unentertaining, unfulfilling or unbalanced game play. Broken mechanics deprive a player of the ability to make meaningful and entertaining choices about their character's activities in the game world. When players describe a mechanic as "broken," they believe that the problems of the mechanic arise from the items, rules and sheets provided by the GMs at the beginning of the game.

Guild writers realize, though, that the players' interpretation and execution of the letter of the rules have an equally strong impact on the effectiveness of game mechanics. Thus, GMs that design game mechanics with the audience in mind have a much lower chance of being considered broken. In the MIT Assassins' Guild, GMs occasionally refer to four unofficial tests that are named after specific members of the MIT Assassins' Guild, as those players are known to break mechanics due to their styles of gaming. I have reworded them to hint at the underlying tensions beneath the tests:

1. Can players gather more information than they should reasonably have, allowing them to succeed in their goals (or solve everybody else's) by simplifying the major tasks in a game to a series of logical optimizations?
2. Given that Guild games are played in a real social circle with real people, will players who get too excited or identify too closely with their characters produce undesirable interpersonal interactions?
3. Conversely, is there a good reason to discourage players from "breaking their characters" in order to gain competitive advantages over other players? Are there ways to reinforce the illusion of the game world and characters?

4. Given that games are competitive and that the rules governing competition can be complicated, can inexperienced or flustered players still grasp the mechanics of the game and make compelling, logical and strategic choices towards success?

Although an experienced GM team can skirt some of the shortcomings of their mechanics through careful casting, a GM team that completely ignores these tests will probably end up with broken mechanics. The desire to produce mechanics that can satisfy the different tests can be described as the tensions of Information, Dissociation, Verisimilitude and Competition, respectively. The rest of this thesis will look at these tensions and some of the more solutions used to fulfill those requirements.

# Information

*“What kind of ulterior motive do you people want?”*

Most tabletop roleplaying games let players create their own character from a range of different races, classes, alignments and backgrounds, allowing players to supply all the interpersonal details of the characters to support roleplaying interactions during the game. Guild games give comparatively little leeway for a player to define his or her own character. At handout, players usually receive materials that detail their character's personality, abilities, possessions and objectives, along with enough background knowledge to support all of the above. Because of this, it is the responsibility of the GM team to make all the necessary preparations that will allow players to gather and to make decisions based on their characters' knowledge during the game. Players need to be able to recognize traits, distinctiveness and potential interactions with various elements of the game when it is appropriate for their characters. For the purposes of fair and interesting competition, it is often necessary to hide certain pieces of information from players as well.

## Bluesheets and Greensheets

To simplify the distribution of large amounts of pre-game information, GMs may prepare a hierarchy of sheets for players to supplement what they learn from their character sheets. These may also help the GMs distribute identical information among multiple players. Having these supplementary sheets on different colors of paper is useful for GMs and players for keeping their sheets sorted. The use of Bluesheets and Greensheets is well

known among other live-action roleplaying groups, suggesting that this convention may date back to the days of the Harvard SIL<sup>36</sup>. The Standard Rules<sup>37</sup> describe the differences and uses of these kinds of sheets:

**Bluesheets:** These are sort of like character sheets for an entire group of people. Tradition prints them on blue paper. They give information on motives, history, structure, etc., common to a group. Keep in mind that what a Bluesheet actually contains is what you think *everybody else* thinks. Your personal views might not be reflected at all by the Bluesheet. Your Character sheet will *always* override the information in a Bluesheet.

**Greensheets:** These sheets detail what special knowledge your Character may have about a variety of subjects, and give some general guidelines for what you can try to do with this knowledge. Tradition prints them on green paper. If you wish to use your special knowledge to try and accomplish something or learn something, or if you are unsure of what your special knowledge may be good for, talk to a GM. Greensheets, like Bluesheets, do not exist in the context of the game.

The line between Bluesheets and Greensheets is often blurry, and some games do not attempt to distinguish between them. “Information Sheets” means Bluesheets and Greensheets.

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<sup>36</sup> Bateman, L. M. (1990) Creating Reality: Assassin Games. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Humanities.

<sup>37</sup> Morris, J. E. & the MIT Assassins’ Guild. (2002) Standard Rules for MIT Assassins’ Guild games. Cambridge, MA.

Contradictions between Bluesheets and character sheets are common for spy and traitor roles, although they can also be used to depict more benign differences in perspective and opinion between characters. Greensheets often include long instructions for complicated mechanics and GMs need to be careful to design mechanics in which competitive success or failure is not determined by the speed of reading of the players.

Character sheets and Bluesheets often list “contacts” near the end of the document, which is a list of players and corresponding characters that the individual receiving the sheets should know at the beginning of game. The character sheet usually gives players the reasons why they have a particular Bluesheet or Greensheet but sometimes that information can only be found by reading one’s own description in the contacts section of a Bluesheet.

### Item Cards, Name Badges and Wall Signs

Many Guild games focus on hunts for MacGuffins<sup>38</sup>: items that multiple characters are seeking to possess for personal use, often as crucial components for some larger conspiracy operating in the background of the game. Items may also be useful as tools for furthering one’s goals; weapons are a generic example. Finally, some items may have little competitive use but may still be appropriate for the purposes of roleplaying.

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<sup>38</sup> “I wanted to make this film about a man who forces a woman to go to bed with another man because it’s his professional duty. The politics of the thing didn’t much interest me, but I realized we had to have a reason for the Germans to be in Brazil. We thought of jewel mining, precious minerals, that sort of thing, and then one day I said to [Ben] Hecht, ‘What about uranium?’ and he shrugged and said he didn’t think it mattered, that one Macguffin was as good as another if we were really putting together a love story.” [Alfred Hitchcock, in an interview about his film *Notorious*, 1946]

The easiest way to represent items in a game is to use an *item card*. These are business-card-sized rectangles of paper, labeled with the name of an item and a short description. With the help of the tool suites, it is simple to ensure that all the players find in their packets a sheet of paper with a card marked “brass knuckles” that they can cut out before the beginning of the game, while a few other players may also find a card marked “blinky helmet<sup>39</sup>” on the same sheet of paper. Most games, however, will also include other information on that card.

Item Card	Freely Transferable
<b>Philip B. Tan’s Thesis</b>	
<b>3104</b>	
<b>Weapon:</b> A thick stack of acid-free paper. Can cause lethal paper cuts.	
1 dot bulky	
Thesis Defense 2003	May 7, 2003

Because many item cards often represent items larger than a business card, item cards often describe the “bulkiness” of the object in terms of “hands” or “dots.” As described in the Standard Rules:

A bulky item is too big or heavy to be carried freely. Bulkiness is measured in ‘hands’ i.e. how many hands it takes to carry it. An item card with N colored dots on it is N-hand bulky. (A dot with a number on it is that many hands worth of bulkiness.)<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> A “blinky helmet” in Guild parlance implies some sort of brainwashing device.

<sup>40</sup> Morris, J. E. & the MIT Assassins’ Guild. (2002) Standard Rules for MIT Assassins’ Guild games. Cambridge, MA.

Thus, a two-hands-bulky object normally requires two hands to carry. Recent GM teams usually do not bother to attach large adhesive dots to the item cards, which means that players have to look at the card carefully to notice that it has “5 dots bulky” printed on it. However, the vocabulary of “dots” has overtaken “hands” for a number of reasons. Many games have characters that are unusually strong and can carry much more than a regular human being while only having two hands. A regular human character would be able to carry a two-dots-bulky object with both hands, whereas King Kong should be able to carry a two-dots-bulky Fay Wray (and more) with a single hand. There are also rules for containers, which would allow normal human characters to use two hands to carry more than two hands of bulky items. As a result of this, many games prefer to use “dots” as a unit of measure of bulkiness rather than “hands.” The slightly more abstract and versatile definition of “dots” clearly describes bulkiness as a property of the item, not the character.

Item cards that list bulkiness provide some information about potential interactions that are possible with the item. Players know that they can only carry a limited number of bulky objects, and there are often rules limiting the storage of bulky objects in pockets. Item cards can have descriptions that explicitly state other potential uses of an item. “Weapon” is a common description on an item card: it defines the item as something useful for combat. Games with more complicated combat mechanics may have item cards that describe exactly how useful they are in combat, with varying numerical bonuses and multipliers that are reminiscent of tabletop roleplaying games.

There are often situations when GMs will not want all the players to know all the potential uses of certain objects. At the same time, GMs may not want characters that *should* know of the uses of an item to know that the item exists at the beginning of game. For instance, some characters may know that magical items can kill monsters but those characters may be unaware that the only magical weapons in games are certain charmed daggers. The GMs might want the process of sorting through all the different items in the game to take up a good deal of time. Thus, they must provide some players with the ability to distinguish the daggers from all the other, non-magical items when the players actually see the item card.

To serve these purposes, item cards often have a series of numerical digits printed along with their text descriptions. These numbers reflect traits of items without stating that information in readable prose. Some players may know that a magical item will have a leftmost digit greater than 5. To further obfuscate information from players who should not be able to tell the difference between certain objects, the digits may require some sort of arithmetic operation to decode their meaning. For instance, if the sum of the rightmost three digits is divisible by three, a character may notice that a certain item is made out of silver.

Even some publicly observable traits can be simplified to a digit. Players are often given name badges with their player's name, character's name, physical description and a badge number. Badges are basically item cards for characters; in fact, many game rules state that a player's name badge represents his character's body. If the player puts the

badge down on a floor and walks away, the character remains in one place; this can be convenient when a character has been “killed” and the player does not want to pretend to be a dead body. The first or last digit on a badge often represents the character’s approximate age in decades; “1” represents a pre-teen, “2” is a young adult or teenager. Rooms and corridors can also have signs that convey information in the same way. Signs are usually full-sized pages taped on a wall with text printed in a large font size for easy reading. Wall signs may include descriptive prose, lists of possible exits and detailed instructions regarding actions that can be performed within the spaces. For example, a room representing a distillery may have a sign that includes its name, a description of its surroundings and a mechanic for drawing beer out of caskets. If it is a secret distillery, the door leading to the room may have a sign that forbids entry or the room may be in a part of the campus designated as “off-limits” by the GMs. Players would then have to find another way in, perhaps a sign elsewhere in the campus that describes a hidden passage and lists the room number of the distillery. The 2001 game *Reality Check III: Dinner at the Schloss Himmelbrand* written by V. Ken Clary, Peter Litwack and Nicholas Martin combined wall signs with dot hunts with their use of “s-packets,” miniscule printed pieces of paper taped in small nooks and crannies all over campus. Many of them gave no useful information but a few slips allowed players to enter parts of campus originally declared “off-limits” by the GMs to discover a variety of hidden rooms.

The MIT campus is lined with underground tunnels and interconnected corridors that allow people to move from building to building without being exposed to the cold Boston winters. Guild members quickly learn the unmarked forks and turns in “the third longest

tunnel system in the world after the Kremlin and the Pentagon<sup>41</sup>” because Guild GMs often use these labyrinthine walkways in games. Because the tunnels intersect and branch off in multiple configurations, by altering information on wall signs, dots or small strips of text, the GMs can change the number of possible routes through the tunnels. In Guild games, a good proportion of players seem to enjoy the exploration and rediscovery of hidden paths around subterranean MIT by means of such “tunnel mechanics.”

However, the nature of item cards, name badges and wall signs also give away a great deal of information. A player finding an item card knows that it represents an item, even if he or she does not know what the item is. Similarly, wall signs represent a space in the game and name badges represent character bodies. Occasionally, GMs only want a few players to notice the existence of a strange space, item or trait. Those players need to be able to easily see and recognize the corresponding signs or envelopes as significant but all other players are expected to completely ignore those same signs or envelopes.

This is accomplished through the use of signs or cards with Greek letters. Players are specifically told in the rules to ignore Greek letters “unless they know otherwise.” For those who should “know otherwise,” GMs might inform them that an envelope stuck on the wall with a big  $\pi$  is really a hidden panel, and by looking in the envelope, they can find a secret item. The inscrutability of a single Greek letter goes a long way in keeping everybody else blissfully ignorant of the existence of the secret panel; that is, unless they see someone opening it. It might be worth noting that MIT engineering students have a

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<sup>41</sup> MIT Admissions (2002) Infinite Corridor Fun Facts.  
<http://web.mit.edu/admissions/infinite/>

reasonable familiarity with the Greek alphabet, allowing Greek letters to serve a mnemonic function. The  $\psi$  (psi) symbol, for instance, is often used to describe things that would be only noticed by psychic characters.

## Memory Packets

In all the techniques listed above, players need to know something about the unique properties of items, characters or spaces ahead of time for their characters to recognize them in the game. For instance, Greek letters are useless if none of the players know of their significance when they encounter them in the game.

It is possible to defer the knowledge of unique properties until the players actually see the symbols or numbers in a game. “Memory packets” are printed slips of paper with two sides: one side displaying a “trigger” and one side listing information that needs to be delivered upon recognition of the trigger. Triggers may be as simple as a single Greek letter or as complicated as a description of events, such as “Open if you fall unconscious.” These slips are stapled shut to prevent players from accidentally reading the hidden information and placed in players’ packets.

When a player encounters the triggering information during the game, the player removes the staple and reads the contents of the memory packet (or “mempack”). Most games give players the freedom to open the mempack at the first convenient opportunity, allowing events like battles to continue without interruptions. Item numbers and badge numbers are often used as triggers, so that players would have no knowledge of the

nature of the number until they actually encounter it in the game. For instance, a trigger on a mepack may simply be the number 1029. When a player with the mepack finds an item card for a dagger with the number 1029, they could open the packet, revealing contents that read, “That’s a magical dagger! You can kill monsters with it!” Lines of speech or direct prompting by a GM can also trigger mepacks.

Mepacks take a fair amount of time to prepare, as they need to be cut out, folded and stapled before they are put in a player’s packet. Thus, they are mostly practical for situations where very few characters will need to react to a situation in special ways. However, because they have the potential to reveal a lot of timely information to a player while effectively concealing the nature of the information, GMs often default to mepacks whenever they wish to defer information availability. Mepacks do have the advantage of being relatively non-hosing for players and GMs during the game, although the small, stapled slips of paper can be easy to misplace. More complicated contrivances, such as player-inserted or nested mepacks, have also been used in games.

### Research Notebooks and Puzzle Trails

The ability to defer the availability of information can be extremely useful for GMs who want players to shift strategies in the middle of the game with the arrival of new intelligence. This gives players a new challenge during the course of a game. This sort of “twist” can produce interesting opportunities for plot and character development, and players that make bad decisions early in the game may receive new opportunities to even

the score. Although mempacks can be quite effective in these regards, there are ways to achieve similar effects with less intensive preparation.

Trails have already been mentioned in the previous chapter as a simple means of providing an abstracted, goal-oriented activity that will last the duration of a game. Some trails may make rare or powerful game items available to players. By making the reward at the end of a trail a crucial piece of information, trails can also be effective tools for delaying the arrival of that information. Complicated trails may also have similar rewards interspersed with the completion of intermediate steps.

Because of their intellectual qualities, puzzle trails are often used for deferring information. Players need to perform mental gymnastics to advance to later stages in a puzzle trail. Some puzzles may be copied directly out of games magazines but many GMs try to work the setting of the game into the puzzles, designing visual stumpers using thematic images or word-association quizzes derived from the text of the scenario. A more ambitious version of the puzzle trail may resemble the annual MIT IAP Mystery Hunt, a puzzle competition held in MIT every January where the solutions for puzzles often provide clues for other puzzles.

There are a number of different ways to progressively reveal the subsequent puzzles in a puzzle trail, such as having a publicly accessible collection of mempack-like slips, each one marked with the name of the trail and a sequential number instead of a trigger. As with a riddle trail, people pursuing the same puzzle trail would be able to use the same

collection of mempacks. With a sufficiently wide variety of puzzles, puzzle trails can encourage many players to distribute the effort of solving the puzzles and to work together to share their findings, although overly complex puzzle trails have an unfortunate tendency to direct the attention of players away from interacting with each other as characters.

To keep the benefits of puzzle trails without taking too much time away from actual roleplaying and gaming, GMs sometimes implement “research trails,” which can be understood as simplified puzzle trails combined with item hunting. Most research trails involve the collection of some scarce item, such as “Random Technical Items” (RTIs<sup>42</sup>) or blood samples from characters instead of solutions to puzzles. This often involves the efforts of multiple players scouring the game area for the correct game items or the cooperation of multiple players to volunteer some private information. Unlike the venturing and deductive qualities of puzzle trails, research trails often resemble a checklist of tasks. Thus, some GMs make research trails available in the form of “research notebooks.” These are in-game documents listing each step in sequential prose, possibly with a minor amount of text scrambling.

Some research trails may also require players to perform word-association tests with a number of characters that have “research skills,” making it possible for others to deduce a character’s hidden agenda. The types of items required to advance to the next step of a

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<sup>42</sup> RTIs are a catchall term used in the Guild to items needed for research trails that do not necessarily have any significance on their own. RTIs are often distributed among the characters and throughout the game space. They often have silly descriptions that highlight their generic, throwaway qualities.

research trail may also hint at the nature of the research. Because research notebooks are in-game documents, they can be stolen or distributed, allowing multiple players to capitalize on a research trail through negotiation or skullduggery.

By providing clues for players to find out what others are working on, research trails can provide interesting opportunities for competitive interaction. Players may be able to find out who their opposition is, what sorts of materials they require, and ways of stopping the availability of those materials. Alternatively, they may be able to devise means of opposing the results of the research, they can try to deprive their opposition of their research notebooks, or they may even attempt to continue the research on their own.

## Statistics

As with tabletop roleplaying games, certain aspects of characters may be defined as numerical statistics, or “stats.” Common stats include strength, health and capacity for magic spells (also known as “mana” in many computer games). GMs often use stats to describe abilities that can change during the game in some quantifiable manner. For instance, “dots of carry” may be a numerical stat, and when a character is injured, that number may drop.

The different stats are usually listed in the rules and the character sheets. Stats often have short abbreviations that allow mechanics and GMs to quickly and unequivocally inform players about changes in their stats. For instance, a “HP” stat may be short for “health points,” and a player walking in a room representing a warehouse full of poisonous gas

may be instructed by a wall sign to “Lose 1 HP for every 5 minutes that you spend in this room.” For easy reference, GMs sometimes provide players with business-card-sized “stat cards” that include both the abbreviations and the values of all of their stats.

Although stats can be simple for GMs to implement, players may have difficulty juggling a multitude of fluctuating stats. A player attempting to keep all of his or her stats in mind might have trouble roleplaying. A player who cannot keep all his or her stats straight may be at a competitive disadvantage. Some GMs have tried to minimize player hosage by ensuring that all non-combat mechanics that interact with stats will have a built-in time delay or will require characters to be willing or unconscious, thus giving players enough time to consult their stat cards.

A player may have a stat without knowing its significance. Again, Greek letters are useful in this regard. For instance, a player may have a positive  $\psi$  stat without realizing that his or her character is a latent psychic. Another, better-informed character might be able to read someone else’s  $\psi$  stat and detect the psychic ability of others. Combined with mempacks, stats can influence each other. For instance, a mempack trigger might instruct, “Open when your  $\pi$  stat equals zero.” Inside, the mempack may instruct the player to “Raise your  $\beta$  stat by 1.” This allows players to be informed about mechanics dependent on the  $\beta$  stat without necessarily knowing how to change their  $\beta$  stat.

Because statistics are numerical abstractions of character traits, players need definite, unequivocal mechanics to legitimize and permit their interactions with each other’s stats

without having to consult GMs. When an individual is holding a mempack that has no definite instructions for opening, perhaps only displaying a Greek letter for a trigger, another player may be able to trigger that individual's mempack through mechanics that concretize abstract interactions. Such effects are usually achieved through the use of "ability cards," which will be described in greater detail in the next chapter.

# Dissociation

*“Where have you been for the last 24 hours?”*

*“I was not being brainwashed.”*

*“Who were you with?”*

*“The people who weren’t brainwashing me.”*

As mentioned in the second chapter, characters in live-action roleplaying games often need to accomplish tasks that players can perform without any mechanics at all. When characters need to converse or pass items to each other, the simplest mechanic is to have no mechanic at all. “People skills” such as deception or negotiation can be extremely complicated and clumsy to mechanic but they can be easily incorporated in games by encouraging players to conduct such interpersonal interactions “for real.” Why might GMs want to mechanic processes that players are naturally and instinctively capable of performing?

When people interact with each other without the mediation of mechanics, it can be unclear whether those people are acting as characters or players. A character may try to weasel his or her way out of a difficult situation but players are not allowed to lie to their fellow players over actual facts of the game. As described in the Standard Rules:

There is a sharp distinction between Player reality and Character reality. Players are expected to treat each other with courtesy and to explain to other Players what their Characters perceive in confusing situations (“My Character’s hands are covered in blood.”) Characters are under no such restrictions, and should do what it takes to further their goals (“Uh, hi Bob. Just got back from the butcher shop.”)

As this example indicates, *while **Characters** may lie to other Characters at almost any time about anything, **Players** may **never** lie to anybody about anything.*<sup>43</sup>

This is a very fine differentiation that can be easily confused. Some players may consider certain interactions as inappropriate between players, while others may interpret those same interactions as happening between characters, thus being acceptable. Some players may hesitate to perform certain in-game activities that would be appropriate for their character for fear that they may be misconstrued as player, rather than character, actions.

Although implementing abstract mechanics for intuitive player actions may seem cumbersome, they can help at avoiding damage, nervousness and arguments between players. In situations such as negotiation, politics, seduction, combat, deception and interrogation, players and GMs may prefer to use mechanics to make clear that such interactions are occurring between characters, not players.

### Non-Players, Game Halts and Dangerous Play

Unlike tabletop roleplaying games, the dynamic energy of live-action roleplaying is heavily reliant on events and player actions occurring in real-time and in real-space. Thus, any mechanics that interrupt the regular flow of time or impede physical movement can be distracting or irritating for players. However, concessions must be made based on the real circumstances of the game and concerns of safety.

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<sup>43</sup> Morris, J. E. & the MIT Assassins' Guild. (2002) Standard Rules for MIT Assassins' Guild games. Cambridge, MA.

Because Guild games take place on the MIT campus, careful consideration must be given to non-players who share the same space with the players. Even if some games do not explicitly provide rules for interacting with most non-players, experienced members of the Guild always try to conduct potentially disruptive game actions away from populated areas of campus and keep corridors and passageways clear for foot traffic. Players are often advised to keep conversations low in volume when non-players are within earshot to avoid “freaking the mundanes<sup>44</sup>” with alarming words like “bomb” or “gun.”

There are occasions, however, when a non-player (an “NP”) unexpectedly arrives in the middle of a pitched battle or a tense moment among characters. Players are allowed to call “game halts” that effectively pause all game activity until circumstances preventing the normal play of the game have been resolved. A player may shout “NP halt” down the hall when an NP approaches, informing everybody to stop what they are doing, stand in their places and wait until the NP has walked past the area where game interactions were occurring. Another signal (usually given by the player closest to the NP’s exit) will inform all players within the area that it is safe to resume the game.

Game halts can also resolve the consequences of mechanics that affect a large area. For instance, if a bomb (usually represented by some sort of alarm clock) explodes in the game, all the characters in a room might receive some sort of damage based on their

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<sup>44</sup> This expression has made its way into the vocabulary of many special interest groups. It describes any regular activity of the group that could potentially cause worry to passers-by who are not “in the know.”

proximity to a bomb. To allow players enough time to notice that a bomb has gone off and to assess the amount of damage that their characters sustain, bomb mechanics may include an automatic game halt. Occasionally, GMs call their own game halts to inform all players of a change in the game environment that all the characters should notice simultaneously.

GMs also use game halts to arbitrate player confusion resulting from near-simultaneous player actions. Players are allowed to call their own game halts if they notice that other players are getting upset or overly excited. By causing all game activities to grind to a halt, the ability of players to pause the proceedings of the game can be a powerful tool for reminding players of the difference between the game and reality. At the same time, such intrusions of reality can be highly annoying when the situation does not warrant a game halt. Thus, players are discouraged from calling game halts unless they believe that it is absolutely necessary.

A less disruptive way to prevent players from engaging in physically dangerous play is to explicitly state that certain actions would not be rewarded by the game. For instance, in a game with a lot of running, players attempting to attack each other within close range could easily collide and get hurt. Many high-speed combat games allow players to ignore damage that their characters receive if their attackers are within their “Zone of Control,” otherwise known as “ZoC.” ZoC is a relative measure of distance, defined by the ability of two players to touch each other with outstretched arms.

Similarly, some games state that projectile shots to the head and that combat occurring in stairwells will do no damage. These mechanics put a player who engages in dangerous play at a competitive disadvantage. Thus, they can be very effective in encouraging players to police their own actions.

## Ability Cards

When players perform some sort of character action that is mediated by a mechanic, they may need to show an “ability card” to other players. Ability cards are slightly larger than item cards and specifically have a side that faces the player holding the card and a side that faces everybody else. The side facing the player with the card will list rules that define and limit the play of the card, e.g. “You may only play this card once a day.” The other side will tell other players the effect of the card, e.g. “Tell me your  $\psi$  stat” or “If you have a  $\pi$  memory packet, open it.” Some mechanics will involve the owner of the ability card and no one else. For those cases, the corresponding cards will not have any useful information printed on the outward-facing side. These cards serve to remind players of their characters’ more esoteric abilities and can be thought of as personal mini-Greensheets.

An ability card often represents a strategically valuable skill of a character that empowers a player to do what he or she cannot do or is not allowed to do in real life. The play of an ability card is an explicit abstraction that has no other in-game effects beside those listed on the text on the card. Ability cards possess the authoritative power of the written rules,

they can conceal the extent of a character's abilities and they differentiate characters by their capacity to interact with the game world and other characters.

Some other LARP groups use homemade weapons of stiff foam and fiberglass for the purposes of representing armed hand-to-hand combat. These "boffer" weapons require physical contact to determine character damage and inexperienced players may find the bruises raised by such combat to be painful and undesirable. The Guild often uses a variety of non-contact mechanics to represent *mêlée* combat, the most complicated of which involve modified ability cards known as "cinematic combat cards." GMs use the text on these cards to describe all sorts of outlandish combat moves for players. In play, however, the characters are "fighting" in an entirely virtual arena. The resulting interactions are usually less visually exciting than the name "cinematic combat" might necessarily imply; conversely, ability cards such as combat cards can go a long way in helping avoid spooking non-players.

Ability cards are not in-game items; the play of an ability card occurs in the real world and not in game reality. Because of these qualities, ability cards can also be useful for constraining and abstracting problematic interpersonal interactions. Ability cards may duplicate activities that some players could achieve without the card, e.g. "I repeatedly shout at you, answer my question truthfully." Players who have such a "Browbeat Witness" ability card realize that a play of the card is sufficient to achieve the desired game effects without actually having to shout at other players. These cards permit certain socially difficult but game-appropriate interactions to occur between characters instead of

players. Players do not have to enact the actual ability to produce the results of the character interaction, thus avoiding emotional conflicts with other players. Even if a player chooses to roleplay according to the description of the ability card, the display of the card makes clear to others that his or her actions are strictly representative of the character, not of the player.

Similarly, when an ability card is played on someone, he or she realizes that the results of such an interaction is largely contingent on the prescribed abilities between characters and does not reflect on any player's gaming ability or lack thereof. To be taken for a ride by a fast-talking opponent can be embarrassing for the player; to be similarly "deceived" by the play of a "Fast Talk" ability card is merely an unfortunate turn of events for the character and is much more likely to be accepted without argument by all the players involved. In this way, ability cards can facilitate socially difficult game interactions and advance the course of events by merit of their dissociative qualities.

## Psychlims

Some ability cards describe disabling traits, rather than skills that empower characters. For instance, players may have to roleplay characters that have an unfortunate tendency to tell the truth or display a nervous tic whenever a certain topic comes up in conversation. Such traits are known as "psychological limitations," often truncated to "psychlims." Psychlims may also be listed in one's character sheet.

GMs put psychlims into a game for a variety of reasons. Some are merely entertaining; some prevent actions or alliances that would disrupt the competitive balance of a game. Occasionally, psychlims reveal an aspect of a character that a player would otherwise have little reason to disclose. This makes potentially damaging information available to the opposition of a player without having to rely on the sportsmanship or the innate roleplaying abilities of the player. For instance, one game required some insane characters to audibly declare, “Mwahaha! I will destroy the world!” every time they made significant progress towards their goals.

This sort of psychlim takes a general motivation of a character and reduces it to a simple, fixed requirement that the player can and must fulfill, whether or not it is beneficial for the achievement of one’s goals. Thus, players need not devote as much attention to their psychlims as to their other goal-oriented motivations. Although a psychlim can sometimes stand in the way of a player’s immersion in his or her character, the mandatory and simplified nature of psychlims can be useful for preserving some semblance of character traits that may otherwise be completely and deliberately ignored over the course of a game. Used well, psychlims can give players the illusion of interacting with characters that have a richer set of character traits than the players themselves care to enact through their roleplaying.

## Truthing and Brainwashing

Many Guild games are based on a dynamic of trust. Every character that one meets in a game could be potentially trustworthy, unreliable or even treacherous. In turn, those

characters may have built other relationships of trust that could translate into potential allies or enemies. The ability of players to establish and build trust with others, and to betray them at an opportune time, can be the keys to success in a typical Guild game.

Truthing and brainwashing mechanics are common in Guild games as they empower players who may not have the social skills necessary to determine the trustworthiness of others. The point of a truthing mechanic is to allow one player to require another to tell the truth. For a character under interrogation, the existence of truthing mechanics may very well bring an abrupt end to their goals. Without a means of bluffing one's way out of trouble, truthing mechanics can uncover traitors relatively easily. If a player needs to work his or her way into a group's confidence to discover some secret information about them and use it against them, truthing mechanics can make his or her job forbiddingly difficult. Furthermore, if it is possible for a large group of people to guarantee their trust in each other and if members of that group are publicly understood to be working for law-enforcement, save-the-world or other typically "good guy" roles, there is often very little that prevents the group from systematically attacking all the other players in game, subjecting them to truthing and removing their opposition by brute-force elimination. These groups are usually referred to as "good guy mobs" and can quickly destroy game balance in ways that GMs often fail to anticipate.

To prevent these sorts of occurrences, GMs often design truthing mechanics to permit only a small number of questions, perhaps limited by the effectiveness and availability of truth drugs or the constitution of the interrogatees. Truthing mechanics that kill characters

in the process would discourage their misuse as “tests of loyalty” among potential allies. At the same time, the mechanic would be useful for procuring reliable information from characters that have already been determined to be members of one’s opposition.

However, a limited-use truthing mechanic can be rendered entirely useless if interrogatees have too much freedom in choosing the wording of their responses. Given a means to do so, any player will attempt to “stall for time” when being truthed by his or her opponents by cleverly sidestepping the questions and giving uninformative answers. With a limited-use mechanic, this means that an unwilling player can often avoid revealing any actual information.

An ineffective truthing mechanic is often worse than having no mechanic at all, as the existence of the mechanic suggests that it is a way to determine the trustworthiness of characters or information without actually being anything of that sort. To address these issues, truthing mechanics often require questions to be phrased in a way in which a “yes” or “no” answer would be unequivocal and sufficient. Alternatively, if the GM directly instructs players to supply the most informative and truthful answer from which their opponents could benefit, most players would recognize that the spirit of the rules frowns upon clever wrangling of the answers.

One can see that truthing mechanics can be extremely difficult to balance. Their dissociative properties enable players to achieve certain game effects without having to be overly suspicious or confrontational. Many players prefer the somewhat deterministic

advantage of truthing mechanics to the much less reliable method of actually having to guess what players are thinking. On the other hand, a poorly implemented truthing mechanic can unbalance the game towards the truther or the truthed and result in unreasonable or unrealistic character interactions.

Some games allow characters to develop technologies and techniques of brainwashing that can make other characters loyal to their cause. It usually does not matter if the subject of the brainwashing was trustworthy or not, since the process of brainwashing will *make* the subject trustworthy. Brainwashing mechanics have been a staple of Guild games for more than a decade,<sup>45</sup> although recent games have seen a slight drop in their frequency of use.

One would imagine that the ability to change another player's loyalties would seriously upset the competitive balance of a game. However, brainwashing is often perceived by characters to be a much more hostile act than truthing, so a single attempt at brainwashing often requires a good deal of scheming and luck to incapacitate a character, move him or her to a secluded spot, place a blinky helmet<sup>46</sup> on his or her head and keep the process from being interrupted for a period of time. GMs often make brainwashing "devices" difficult to create and simple to destroy, further limiting the mechanic of brainwashing. The successful execution of a brainwashing mechanic can undoubtedly

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<sup>45</sup> Bateman has an anecdote of the result of a brainwashing mechanic in her thesis. [Bateman, L. M. (1990) Creating Reality: Assassin Games. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Humanities]

<sup>46</sup> See previous chapter.

translate into a powerful advantage but such an advantage would be commensurate reward for a lot of player effort.

More importantly, where truthing mechanics tend to abruptly end games for some interrogatees, brainwashing mechanics simply substitute or supplement preexisting goals with new ones. Players who fall prey to brainwashing mechanics still find themselves very much in the game. In fact, some players discover that being successfully brainwashed ends up giving them more exciting goals to pursue.

Brainwashing could be understood as serving the same purposes as a player's skill at persuasion. Instead of having to convince players to switch loyalties, a clearly defined mechanic allows players to perform a systematic series of acts that, if successful, will result in bringing trustworthy allies over to their side. Although some characters may take issue with having their heads tinkered with, most players do not see brainwashing as "losing" but simply as a turn of events in their character's story. Thus, many players are willing and eager to cooperate with their new allies. In games of minimal character complexity, brainwashing could easily end up being the most interesting thing to happen to a character's emotional and intellectual development.

## Seduction

Many espionage and fantasy genres feature seduction as a significant narrative element. For games operating in those genres, it would be amiss if GMs disallow the use of seduction as a means of building alliances or misleading opponents. In truth, however,

there is little that GMs can (or should) do to prevent players from flirting with each other in any kind of social game format and actual romantic relationships between players have a tendency to influence character interactions in game. The situation where players attempt to seduce players for the purposes of achieving game goals has been jokingly referred to as “WYSIWYG,” computer shorthand for “what you see is what you get.” GMs sometimes write the phrase “seduction is WYSIWYG” in rule sets to imply “if any seduction occurs in game, we didn’t intend nor plan any of it,” absolving themselves of any emotional fallout that may occur between players after the game.

This simplistic approach to the issue of seduction may seem convenient but in many cases, it fails to capitalize on the potential of romantic relationships between characters. Often WYSIWYG seduction results in no seduction at all. Players are likely to conduct themselves on strictly platonic and professional terms. Thus, their characters interact in a similar manner. At worst, WYSIWYG seduction can lead to some unpredictable or nonsensical results in the game as players twist events and alliances in ways that may have little relevance to the personalities of the characters or the circumstances of the game.

Providing mechanics for seduction might seem to be problematic but many Guild games feature seduction mechanics, implying that there is some popular merit to the idea. GMs that provide mechanics for character seduction acknowledge that, at least for certain kinds of games, affairs of the heart should play a major role in the decision-making of characters.

There have been a large variety of different seduction mechanics for Guild games, suggesting the many different aspects of charisma and attraction that GMs see as applicable for different games. Most seduction mechanics, however, occur in three overlapping stages: a preamble, a competitive action, and consequences. The preamble usually requires players to interact in some conversational way for a limited amount of time. Once accomplished, a player might play an ability card or use rock-paper-scissors to determine if the seduction was successful. If successful, rule-based roleplay opportunities and competitive advantages and disadvantages come into play.

GMs can control the use of seduction mechanics by determining the possible results of seduction, thus encouraging seduction to occur in a manner that would be appropriate for the genre of game. Some seduction mechanics are merely brainwashing mechanics in disguise, a means of altering another character's loyalties by willfully playing with character emotions. Some facilitate goal achievement, where a character actively works to attain another's affection through gifts, words and deeds. Some create competition between otherwise unrelated characters by having them struggle over the attentions of a shared love interest. Some games simply highlight "flirting for the sake of flirting" as being appropriate for the setting, structuring their seduction mechanics to that end.

All seduction mechanics, barring WYSIWYG, share one trait. They allow players to conduct and resolve romantic character interactions without depending on the mutual attraction of the players. Seduction mechanics act as a layer of abstraction that divides the

action of the player from that of the character. This means that players who may not be predisposed or skilled in seduction can have their characters engage in romantic relationships that are entirely confined to the limits of the game world. This “safety layer” encourages players to initiate and maintain character romances, thus allowing the romances to play a major part in determining the course of a game in a way for which the GMs can adequately anticipate, plan and cater.

In *A New Deal*, a film noir game I wrote in 2002, I created a complicated seduction mechanic that involved nested preamble and competitive elements in an attempt to capitalize on all of the possibilities listed above into a single mechanic. It involved players having to strike up banter, compare cards, find an empty classroom, and engage in a game of blackjack that could result in a number of different consequences.<sup>47</sup> One of the primary challenges in the design of this mechanic was finding ways for players to engage in such complicated interactions while staying in character and reinforcing the atmosphere of the film noir setting. The following chapter addresses this tension and different approaches to make abstract mechanics seem a little less abstract.

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<sup>47</sup> This was by no means the most complicated seduction mechanic I have written. My games have been known to have rules for seduction that are at least as long as the rules for combat. The actual rules of *A New Deal* can be found in the appendices.

# Verisimilitude

*“You see a flock of 20 screaming chickens. Roleplay accordingly.”*

Many people choose live-action roleplaying over tabletop roleplaying games because simple character actions, such as moving or talking, do not need to have mechanics in a LARP. Peter Litwack, a GM in the Guild, poses this specific question to other GMs: “Could the players just do it without having to mechanic it?” Mechanics have a tendency to compromise rather than enhance verisimilitude with the game world. For reasons mentioned in the previous chapter, there can be good reasons to constrain the natural abilities of the players but GMs realize that mechanics often come at the expense of the immersive experience.

However, this is not always the case. Mechanics of verisimilitude can encourage players to do things in the game world that are appropriate for their characters would and, conversely, these mechanics discourage activities that would be inappropriate from a roleplaying stance. When players can identify closely with their characters, they are less likely to take frivolous liberties with their virtual roles in order to gain competitive advantages. These mechanics reinforce the players’ empathy with their characters by improving the correspondence between the players’ actions and their characters’ abilities and between the spaces in the real world and the environment of the game world. Unlike mechanics of dissociation, which encourage players to rely on highly abstracted game mechanics to achieve their goals, mechanics of verisimilitude encourage players to imagine, improvise, act and behave as if they really were the character to engage players in their characters’ motivations for achieving those goals.

## Props and Guns

Despite the amount of work involved, many GMs will go to great lengths to provide physical representations, or “physreps,” of various items that are important in the game. Simply known among stage circles and other live-action roleplaying groups as “props,” these tangible objects are designed to give players an immediate understanding of the size, weight or potential uses of the object.

Physreps can greatly clarify certain game interactions. If players are told that an eighteen-inch foam tube represents a medieval sword, they will generally understand that they should not roll it into a coil and fit it in their pocket. They will also assume that other players holding eighteen-inch foam tubes represent characters that are armed with similar swords. Of course, compared to item cards, props require much more advance preparation on the part of the GMs. However, item cards are difficult to distinguish from a distance and require players to read the text on the card to gather basic information. Players may reasonably expect to be able to distinguish between a character carrying an electric stungun or a character with a huge bar of gold; item cards do not facilitate that process. The following paragraph in the Standard Rules addresses issues surrounding non-physrepped items:

...be reasonable with items. You can't carry a hundred rocks in your pocket, you can't fold a sword in half, you can't hide a life-sized statue in a fire hose. Your

Character shouldn't either. Only do things with item cards that your Character would be able to do with the actual items; use common sense.<sup>48</sup>

The weight and size of physrepped items can effectively encourage players to think of game items as real objects, not as random MacGuffins. A 2002 ten-day science-fiction game named *L5* written by Jake Beal, Jim Waldrop and Joseph Foley used several large PVC pipes filled with cement to represent objects that would normally require two people to carry. Upon discovering these physreps, players naturally began to look for carts or for trustworthy allies to help move the objects. In this way, they had to strategize about the transport of the items in the same way that their characters needed to think about them. In *A New Deal*, a 2002 film noir game of my own, several characters were looking for a stolen government computer. The physrep was a heavy, seven-foot-tall steel rack filled with scrap electronics and squeaky wheels, deliberately sized to remind the 20<sup>th</sup> century players of the size of computers in 1948.

Physreps can also have an emotive impact, even if they are not immensely large or heavy. When one straps a “sword” onto one’s belt, wields it with both hands, or holds it up to another player’s neck, Janet Murray would call that length of foam a “threshold object,”<sup>49</sup> a tangible entity that has a presence in both the physical world and the virtual world, helping players to imagine across that threshold.

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<sup>48</sup> Morris, J. E. & the MIT Assassins’ Guild. (2002) Standard Rules for MIT Assassins’ Guild games. Cambridge, MA.

<sup>49</sup> Murray, J. (1997) Hamlet on the Holodeck. New York: Free Press.

The Guild places great emphasis on the safety of props, particularly with regards to sword-like weapons, as GMs realize that some players may get carried away and start swinging them around. However, games set in the *Star Wars* universe tend to include officially licensed toy lightsabers that are available at larger toy stores. A toy lightsaber is made of hard plastic and could easily hurt somebody if it is swung fast enough. They also tend to be more expensive than the usual soft foam tubes. However, these toys not only look the part but also have the ability to retract and extend in a fashion reminiscent of the lightsabers in the movies. In the 2000 *Star Wars* game named *Wretched Hive of Scum and Villany* by Brian Sniffen, Ariel Segall and Charles Leiserson, the GMs added the use of the double-ended lightsabers as introduced by George Lucas' *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. They gave combat bonuses to Sith characters wielding these lightsabers with both blades extended and similar bonuses to Jedi characters who wielded these lightsabers with only one blade extended. In this way, the GMs included certain props based on their functionality and designed their game mechanics to take advantage of that functionality.

In the Guild, no other prop comes close in popularity to the toy gun. Rubber dart guns and plastic disc guns launch disposable, lightweight projectiles through the air, requiring players to aim straight and dodge quickly. Players often fail to feel the impact of the dart or disc through their clothes but the Guild usually sticks to “shooter calls the shot” rules on two rationales: only the shooter can be counted on to actually see the trajectory of the shot, and players can be trusted to be honest about their hits and misses, since so many mechanics of Guild games already rely on the honor system. Toy guns have a tendency to

jam and make a lot of noise when firing. It can be more difficult to pull out a toy gun from concealment and fire the gun, compared to the use of any other physrep. These problems should make toy guns unlikely candidates for performing Guild assassinations, especially if there are other mechanics for ranged combat. Yet, every time a GM team announces a new game, some Guild member will invariably ask, “will there be guns?”

Toy guns are the threshold objects of choice for the Guild because they succeed in representing both the physical and the functional attributes of real guns. They are the right size and can be concealed in pockets just like real guns. Their projectiles actually fly through the air and players know that their aim can affect the outcome of the game in the same way that their characters’ aim can affect the course of events in the game world. Furthermore, a toy gun, at close range, can actually sting if it hits unclothed skin. Even though players know that no one is allowed to shoot at another player’s head, holding a gun up to someone’s head can generate a real, instinctive fear that will make most players flinch, deepening the immersive experience considerably.

In dialogue with the popularity of toy guns are mechanics that dictate the effects of being hit by one of their projectiles. Many Assassin game rules make toy guns powerful in combat, disabling most characters with a single hit. Considering that most martial combat mechanics in the Guild include a probabilistic chance of failure, toy guns become the weapon of choice at close range and the *only* choice at long range. In games where guns make little sense, e.g. if every character is a supernatural being, toy guns may still be used to represent some sort of non-ballistic ranged attack, such as a magical spell.

Toy guns have a firm grip on the imagination of members of the MIT Assassins' Guild. GMs realize that if they want to write a game that does *not* feature toy guns, they need to have an extremely good reason for their decision. It is worth noting that games in the MIT Assassins' Guild that disallow violent solutions to conflicts are even rarer than Guild games without toy guns.

### Atmospheric Spaces on Campus

The arrangement of game locations can affect the pacing and flow of the game. However, these spaces can also be important for conveying the atmosphere of the game world to the players. Because players take time and effort to travel from one point to another, players can get a better sense of the size and physicality of their environs if the GMs choose to enhance that aspect of the game.

Players need to know where their characters are in the game world before they can start walking around in it. In many games, the GMs provide the players with a map of campus, labeled with publicly known game locations. However, maps may not be appropriate for games with secret locations or for high-action games such as SIK games. For those situations, GMs will use wall signs to convey the necessary geographical information. With each important room or corridor having its own sign, the extra space allows for a large amount of descriptive prose. The preparation, production and setup of signs can consume a considerable amount of GM time; generally, GMs ask Guild members who are not involved in the game to help with the setup. However, players tend to respond well to

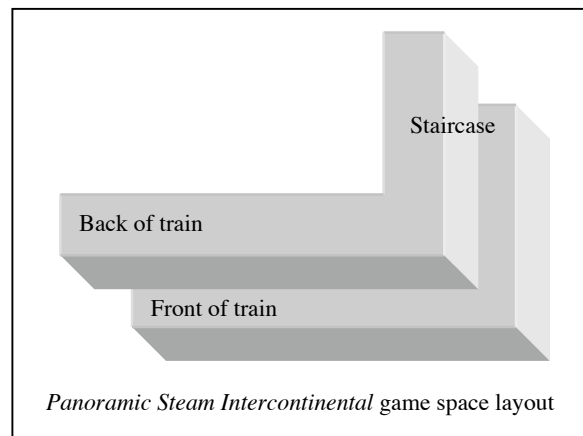
a proliferation of game signs, as it takes some of the effort and guesswork out from having to imagine the game world, reinforcing the shared reality among all the players reading the same sign in the same space.

Some rooms and room arrangements may be chosen based on their similarities to the game world. Experienced GMs, knowing that certain rooms have the furniture and professional décor for roundtable meetings, may designate them as corporate boardrooms or council chambers. Lecture halls are excellent sites for courtrooms and churches. In *A New Deal*, signs with important information were placed under street lamps and in campus alleys, requiring players to meet at spaces that cast dramatic shadows and evoked stereotypically film noir locales.

The dim, claustrophobic and echoing tunnels under MIT are often used in games that emphasize spatial exploration as a significant challenge in game play. Like their characters, players need to discover clues and routes through the tunnels that will direct them to secret locations dotted across the campus. The atmospheric qualities of the underground passages, combined with the similarity between the activities of the players and their characters, can make tunnel exploration an extremely immersive experience. Unfortunately, a poorly written tunnel mechanic could end up hosing players, and continuous traversal of the MIT tunnel system often results in tired players with sore feet, which rapidly snaps them back to reality.

In *Panoramic Steam Intercontinental*, a summer 2001 game that I wrote with Charles Leiserson, the characters were passengers in a train. The space for the game used two floors of three interconnected buildings. Players were told that the corridor representing the front of the train was directly below the corridor representing the back of the train. In order to walk to the back of the train, however, players had to stay on the same floor and walk away from the front until they reached the very furthest staircase, which they could then use to go up a floor and make their way back.

This gave players an impression of the linearity and the length of the train. The corridor that I designated as the front of the train had a room that was particularly warm in the summer, making it a natural choice for the boiler room of the train. To



heighten the atmosphere, a stereo system played the sound of a train engine in that room. The further one walked away from the front of the train, the less they heard of the engine.

## Limitations

Players usually have access to a full range of faculties including vision, hearing, speech, and mobility. Characters, however, may be blind, deaf, mute or lame. By adding limitations, players constantly remind themselves that they are playing a role and not simply being their normal selves. While other Live-Action Roleplaying groups may allow players to keep both eyes open while playing the part of a blind person, many Guild

players with a similar part would expect to keep their eyes closed, or at least blindfolded, while they are in the game. Similarly, when a character is supposed to be unconscious, many Guild players will shut their ears and close their eyes to prevent themselves from noticing anything that they should not. Even though the honor system is often adequate to deal with such situations, Guild players often consider it important to reinforce such physical limitations in their roleplay. Players will also maintain a limp if it is appropriate for their character, although some have found that prolonged, unbalanced walks can turn fake limps into real ones.

Some limitations can be less debilitating. Many games have mechanics that require players to walk “heel-toe,” placing one foot directly in front of the other to impede one’s maximum speed. The characters may be dragging something heavy, they may be trying to negotiate a difficult passage or they may be drugged. In all cases, the heel-toe limitation often ends up heightening the roleplay experience for the player by manifesting the situation of their character as a real, physical constraint. Furthermore, heel-toe walking can be easily noticed from a distance and give other players a chance to react to the impaired character’s circumstances.

Foreign accents can be an effective means of keeping players engaged with their characters. By speaking differently, players think harder about their speech and are more likely to reword sentences to fit the imagined vocabulary, formality and biases of their character. After a few hours of speaking in a forced accent, players often slip into a comfortable groove that allows them to converse comfortably while maintaining an

altered speaking pattern. As long as the sense of an accent can be conveyed, one will always be somewhat engaged in speaking as a character rather than as a player.

Of course, it can be difficult to maintain an accent in a game that lasts ten days, especially considering how ten day games tend to be punctuated with “game breaks” that require players to take time off from their game play to deal with real life. On the flip side, certain accents can also be highly infectious. A particular Guild member has been given the accolade of “Master Assassin” due to her gaming abilities but also because she managed to infect the entire cast of a game with a terrible southern accent. Such circumstances can be entertaining, if the accent is appropriate for the entire cast of a game, or confusing, if the accent is not.

Accents could be imagined as a type of psychlim, as they deny players the ability to speak normally. However, they also actively encourage players to perform in a manner that mimics the traits of their characters, promoting players’ identification with their characters. Upon hearing the accent, players will tend to converse with the person in front of them as an actual character without being reminded of the player behind the character. Thus, accents are rarely used as mechanics of dissociation.

## Performances and Costuming

Some mechanics require players to perform theatrics in front of other players. For instance, they may have to deliver a speech to win the favor of NPCs. Some characters may actually be performers, such as singers, actors or musicians. In *Nanopunk: Tokyo*, a

game in 2003 written by Jay Muchnij, Jennifer Clay, Eddy Karat and I, number of characters were chefs, and another character was the host of the Iron Chef cooking competition. This required players to perform a variety of different staged roles on a simulated television show.

Some players may feel empathy for their characters when they are preparing for their performances; stage fright can be a powerful experience for players. However, when they are actually performing, players tend to think more about the details of the performance, not about their characters. This is particularly true if the style of performance tends to hide the traits of the characters, such as drama. It is easier for a player to perform a theatrical role than for a player to pretend to be a character performing a theatrical role, and the nuances of expression between the two would be lost on most Guild members.

The chief benefit of in-game performances is for the audience rather than for the performers. Performance mechanics often require players to act quite differently from their normal patterns, or even their characters' normal patterns. The spectacle effectively communicates to an audience that the performance is firmly rooted in the reality of the game world. It means little to the audience whether the characters or the players are the people singing on the stage. All that matters is that they are audiences of some sort of in-game show, presented with an in-game spectacle and surrounded by other members of an in-game audience who are sharing in that same experience.

Many games require players to perform “rituals” to achieve some in-game effects. These rituals visibly communicate the occurrence of an important game event: the approaching success of a player’s goals, an impending change to the game world, or some alteration among all the participants of the ritual. Many rituals also have requirements for some sort of performance, such as a chant or speech. This brings the informative property of the mechanic well into the game reality. Players chancing upon a performance ritual not only see opponents achieving their goals but may also hear characters calling out the names of evil gods. Thus, when they decide, “this is bad, we should stop them,” they make that decision both as a player and as a character.

Many GMs encourage costuming and many players go to great lengths to prepare costumes for their roles. Some games even grant players certain advantages in the game if they take the effort to costume. Like performance mechanics, this tends to improve the verisimilitude of the game world for other players who actually see the costumed characters, encouraging them to interact directly with the fictional characters, not with the players pretending to be characters. It is worth noting that the process of dressing up may help players get into character, and costumes that change a player’s posture or the way they move can be an effective physiological reminder for the player.

By that same token, however, costumes and costume props can quickly become uncomfortable. As a game wears on, hats come off, gloves are removed and suits and dresses are replaced with t-shirts and jeans. Sometimes, it can take a little sleight of hand to encourage players to keep using costume props. When designing *A New Deal*, I wanted

the players to pretend to smoke as often as characters would in a film noir movie, which is to say, incessantly. However, it is very difficult to convince twenty non-smokers to keep a stick in their mouths for hours on end. Even edible candy cigarettes required more persuasion.

The key was to appeal to the competitive spirit of Guild players. The rules stated that characters would be a little harder to kill if they were shot or stabbed with a cigarette in their mouth. As a result, players kept candy cigarettes in their mouths at all times, not wishing to lose the competitive edge that came with the props. However, once they had the incentive to keep the candy cigarettes around at all times, the players began to play, gesture and flirt with the white sticks of sugar. Once players discovered that the candy browned nicely over a flame, lights were offered as openers to conversation. Players have remarked that the ever-present cigarettes played an important part in making the entire experience more “cinematic,” which is good for a game based on a genre of film.

This is an example where a competitive mechanic (combat bonuses) satisfied tensions of verisimilitude (cigarettes in a film noir setting) by giving players a way to identify with their characters (a reliance on cigarettes) even though they did not have the abilities of their characters (smoking). Competition can be an extremely powerful tool for steering player activity in a variety of ways but describing the value of competition in the Guild games will require another chapter.

# Competition

*“The best way to a man’s heart is through his back.”*

Previous chapters have looked at several mechanics that enable players to compete against each other and resolve the results of the competition. However, there are many other ways to complicate and stimulate competition. The main challenge for a mechanic of competition is to generate, balance and resolve conflicts between characters that players will find interesting. This could be accomplished by simulating one-on-one conflict, military combat or political wrangling, just to name a few commonly contested arenas of Guild games. Competitive mechanics in Guild games normally aim to resolve competing player decisions unequivocally to provide a satisfying player experience, although not all competitive mechanics or games necessarily need to adhere closely to this tenet.

## Layers of Epic Level

In the chapter on Information, Bluesheets were presented as a way to supply pre-game information to multiple members of the same group. Many Guild games have a competitive structure that consists primarily of group versus group conflict, rather than individual versus individual. Instead of creating and facilitating a competitive system that must be robust and entertaining enough to engage players attempting to fulfill twenty to fifty unique goals, GMs often prefer to approach the problem as three to five generalized competing forces. The savings in preparation time can be considerable, leaving more time for san-checking.

Many players, however, prefer to play characters that are unique from others in a game. However, by layering multiple levels of group conflict on top of each other, GMs can create a game that gives each character a unique set of goals by assigning them a unique combination of groups. For instance, a layer of competition in a game may have five separate groups in opposition. With only three such layers, the game has the potential to support sixty<sup>50</sup> unique combinations of group affiliations, assuming that some characters may have two groups in common. This simplifies the workload from sixty unique character sheets to fifteen unique group Bluesheets. As an example, a character may be a member of a corporation engaged in economic negotiations, a member of a family pursuing a vendetta and a secret conspiracy to eliminate the head of state. Other characters may be members of other corporations or other families, and may be working to brainwash, replace or protect the head of state.

This simplification has some unintended side effects. Experienced players have described the basic three-layer conspiracy game as “the plot that is your cover, the plot that gets you killed, and the plot that you really care about,” implying jadedness that comes with the overuse of the format. For groups on any one particular layer to serve as effective competition for their opponents, the groups must be given goals that are approximately the same in difficulty, complexity and motivation. A group that is merely trying to find some private documents to balance their accounts would pose little threat against a group that needs those same documents to destroy the world. The phrase “epic level” describes

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<sup>50</sup> The math used here is known as a *permutation*.  ${}^5P_3 = 60$

the stakes of a competition as understood by a player. Assuming that all the competing groups on a particular layer are operating on the same epic level, players will often note that one layer is more grandiose than the rest, relegating the other two layers to serve as convenient cover stories or worthless risks and thus not really being goals at all.

This issue is accentuated when GMs deliberately write goals for groups with this sort of ascending order of epic level in mind. However, there are some ways to make the competition more interesting. By wording the text and designing the setting of a game to glamorize some of the lower epic level goals over the higher epic level objectives, players may come to different conclusions as to which layer is actually their highest priority. This thrusts greater responsibility onto the leaders of groups to motivate and inspire their lieutenants to focus on a particular set of tasks. Groups with members that can all perceive and agree on the significance of their goals will have a greater chance of success in such games. Spies and traitors can also complicate the game by making a character a member of multiple groups on a single layer but only loyal to one.

In games with varying loyalties and spies, players should not be misled into thinking that they should trust their associates completely when their success actually hinges on winning over or suspecting their teammates. Characters can be completely deluded about the game world but players expect to know the attitude with which they should approach the circumstances of the game. If teammates may betray their group because they are spies or because not all members may have the same priorities, players generally want to know ahead of time that this is a possibility. If not, betrayals may be misconstrued as

players breaking the rules of the game or may lead players to question the reliability of the rules and the GMs.

Of course, not all Guild games treat group conflict strictly within layers of epic levels. Many games include groups that operate on multiple epic levels, and with sufficient complexity, it becomes pointless to expect group goals to fit neatly into any given layer. Simple variations to factors, such as the sizes of the groups, can dramatically influence the flavor of the conflict. A group-versus-group struggle might have a very different tone compared to a character-against-the-world paranoid quest, although the amount of work on the part of the GMs is similar. GMs often create more groups than are necessary to provide minimal variation between characters, allowing the assignment of groups to fit the description of the characters rather than the other way around. Games that approach pre-development by focusing on character personalities instead of group goals often find this approach to be the most flexible and faithful to their original ideas.

## Shadowruns

The easiest way to equalize group challenge across a layer of competition is to make them basically identical, with a similar set of goals, a similar distribution of players in casting and a similar amount of resources. As with characters, however, players like their groups to be unique in any and all of these aspects. One way to allow very different groups to compete on the same epic level is to pit them against the GMs instead of each other, allowing the GM team to create challenges that are geared specifically for the strengths and weaknesses of a group. Without having to juggle the multiplicity of

variables in group-versus-group conflict, this can produce reliable estimates of a group's expected completion time. GMs can also adjust the challenges facing a group if they prove to be too difficult or too easy without affecting the challenge for other groups.

Of course, this may lead to a lot of work on the GMs' part. However, the Guild has a number of ways to streamline the process of providing individualized, multi-step goals that are a more complex than riddle trails. One of the more recent areas of innovation in the Guild is in the development of "shadowrun mechanics," which allow characters to break into high-security compounds to steal or change important data or materials. The name "shadowrun"<sup>51</sup> is borrowed from the title of a roleplaying game published by FASA Corporation, which has a strong emphasis on breaking and entering. Instead of placing dots for players to find all over campus, GMs place hidden printed sheets within a small space, often a basement corridor. When players find the sheets, they will then know that they will need to gather characters with certain skills or certain items that will allow them to bypass the GM-created defenses, which may also include tests of speed or puzzle-solving ability.

This gives opponents the opportunity to find out what they are doing and impede a group's progress. However, unlike group-versus-group conflict, the bulk of the work involved in defeating a shadowrun is in finding ways to defeat the challenges presented by the GMs, which allows GMs to tailor the challenges to present a specific level of difficulty to any particular group. However, shadowrun mechanics can also be used for

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<sup>51</sup> Mulvihill M, Boyle R, Bills R, Gelman D-P, Kenson S and Szeto J. (1998, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) Shadowrun. New York: McGraw Hill-NTC.

direct group-versus-group or character-versus-character conflicts by having multiple groups or characters seeking the prize at the end of an easily found shadowrun.

## Rezzes

GMs who design games that maintain direct competition between groups within a layer of epic level have some standard approaches for quantifying and comparing the relative strengths of groups that may have very different traits. To understand how this plays out in the design of a game, let us examine some properties that often define the variations of groups in SIK games that tend to operate on a single layer of competition: combat.

The MIT Assassins' Guild hosts a weekly game known as "Patrol," which is a sort of dart-gun tag game with teams. The rules are simple: use the dart gun to shoot anybody who is not in your team. If you are shot, however, the game does not quite end for you. You go to the nearest stairwell, walk up a flight or two, and you are now back in the game. This process of returning back into the game is known as "rezzing," an abbreviation of "resurrecting."

Many Guild games do not include rezzing because of the thorny issue of player knowledge versus character knowledge. When a character dies at the hands of an opponent, the player is usually aware of who was responsible for the character's death. However, if the player is allowed to return to the game as the same character, is it fair for the player to bring the knowledge of the killer into the game? If he or she returns as a

different character, can the player be trusted not to relate information that the new character should not know? For many GMs, the answer to these questions is simply “no.”

However, in SIK games and some high-combat games, players need relatively little information about other characters to engage in their basic objectives, which usually boil down to attacking anyone who is not on your team. Rezzing thus becomes a feasible method of mimicking the existence of vast numbers of characters without needing many players. In one of the most memorable high-combat games of Guild history, *Antartica*<sup>52</sup> (1994) by Mark Rousculp, Derek Herrera and Michael Moore, many of the characters were conventional in the sense that they would die and leave the game after taking enough damage. When confronted by players who could return to the game by simply running a couple of yards away, the game quickly turned from “kill the aliens” to “stay alive.” The GMs have described *Antartica* as “an experiment in fear” and many who have played in the game readily confirm the validity of that claim. The success of *Antartica* has been influential on the development of SIK games and on Guild vocabulary. *Antartica* described character types with near-infinite resurrections (“rezzes”) as “vespid,” a term now common in Guild parlance that alludes to the wasp-like creatures in James Cameron’s 1986 film *Aliens*.

### Game Balance Across Functional Differences

Rezzing is only one of the aspects that can differentiate a group from another in a SIK game, although a poor implementation of a rezzing mechanic can lead to an

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<sup>52</sup> The GMs deliberately misspelled the word “Antarctica” for the title.

overwhelming advantage to certain groups. GMs need to spend time looking at “game balance,” which is a vague assessment of the probabilities that groups and players have of succeeding or failing in their goals in a game. By adjusting various parameters of competitive mechanics, GMs can improve the game balance by bringing the probabilities of success within reach of all the players.

When balancing the combat abilities of multiple groups in a SIK game, GMs take into account the number of times that characters can rez, the amount of damage that a character can receive before dying (often quantified as “hit points”), and the kinds of toy weaponry available to the players. The issue of balance eventually comes down to a single question: as far as the GMs can predict, when opposing groups meet in the game and engage in combat, will it be a fair fight?

A group of weak characters that can rez will usually return to combat after a short time delay. They might win a war of attrition but would also have difficulty holding a territorial line of defense. A group of characters with a large number of hit points would be able to push through considerable opposition before falling, and medical abilities or hit point regeneration would sustain the group through multiple engagements. Players holding rapid-fire weapons might be able to take down a charging mob of opponents before losing a single ally. The number of different toy guns and homemade foam and cloth substitutes used by the Guild in its SIK games is considerable, giving GMs a respectable range of choices for providing different kinds of firepower for different players.

That was just a glimpse into the possibilities for balancing different combat capabilities in games that largely focus on ranged combat. Of course, it is always possible to have an equal mix of different kinds of characters in a single group, thus making the groups functionally identical, relying on the prose descriptions of the groups to differentiate the groups. Guild GMs use the word “paint” when referring to descriptive elaborations that do not translate into significant operational decisions. The color of the teams or the game may be different but their basic mechanics and strategies are the same.

There is a strong case for keeping competing groups functionally different. Guild players are notoriously quick to dismiss “paint” if there is little reason to sustain the descriptive differences of the groups. Conversely, it is much easier for a player to pretend to be a member of the toughest gang on the planet if the character has the hit points to prove it. Even though it may be complicated, experienced GMs are capable of balancing quantifiable properties such as hit points and limited rezzes against qualitative factors such as weapon type and player skill to even the odds for players and provide a level competitive playing field. All these factors accommodate groups that are uniquely limited in their range of competitive abilities, thus influencing the strategies available to the groups. Players need to anticipate the actions of other groups during the course of the game to secure victory, and when facing functionally different groups, players are challenged to outguess their opponents without full knowledge of their capabilities or their strategic options. Finally, the identification of the player with the group can be heightened when the unique qualities of the character are congruent with the unique

qualities of the group, thus providing a better incentive for a player to care about the success of the group.

Of course, the casting of players and the objectives of groups will also influence the game balance. A group might be trying to eradicate another group, or it might merely be attempting to fight its way to the limits of game space. Groups may be contesting for control of relatively even territory. The range of abilities of a group could change over the course of the game with the development of technologies or the loss of characters. In games with more roleplaying, “paint” will significantly influence the attitude that players will have towards the carriage of their characters. Bluster and pre-assigned respect can go a long way in a game that focuses less on competition based on quantifiable advantages. However, one may find similar challenges in balancing other forms of competition resolution that have very little to do with combat.

## Voting

A number of games have provided mechanics to simulate the processes of government that extend far into the game world. One of the simplest is the procedure of voting. Players may be called on to nominate and elect representatives to oversee important concerns for the rest of the game or beyond. Some characters may have goals that require them to get a specific person, perhaps themselves, into a position of power by the end of the game. Alternatively, voting procedures may determine the implementation of certain projects or plans, which could be a character’s goal in itself or just a helpful step towards a larger objective.

Games that have a strong political component often assign functional advantages to holders of certain abstract roles, encouraging players to campaign and claim abstract positions of power before the game ends, even if they have no prescribed goal to attain such a position. For instance, a minister of finance might have access to cash reserves, supplying the character that holds the post with an increased income or the ability to change the allocation of supplies to various resource-hungry projects. Players could then use the additional money or the completed projects to fulfill game goals that have little to do with being the minister of finance.

In Guild games, however, voting can be much more complicated than the basic one-man, one-vote scheme. A character might have lesser or greater influence on “democratic” procedures based on their station, their wards, their family connections or their affiliates. In *Caer Phaedria* (2002) by Jake Beal, Susan Dorscher, Jay Muchnij and Jade Wang, characters needed to draft and pass governmental edicts to achieve a variety of political goals. Players had to seek the cooperation and signatures of others to pass edicts, the signatures of some characters counted for more than others, and new edicts overrode contradictory old edicts.

### Economies and Conflict Generation

In *A New Deal*, characters were accorded a quantifiable value of “big bucks” representing their access to political favors and their clout in City Hall. Entertainers garnered more influence as they became big stars, law-enforcement officials needed political favors to

carry out large-scale searches of Chicago, city officials and mafia could spend “big bucks” to promote or vote down large public works projects. Unlike a character’s political power in *Caer Phaedria*, which had the same value for every edict, “big bucks” were expended with each use. Players not only had to assess the merit of possible expenditures of “big bucks,” they had to make judgments on their worth as well. Every “big buck” spent on one project was one “big buck” less for other ventures.

In Guild parlance, *A New Deal* used an “economy” to mimic a political process. Guild games usually design economies by starting with limited supplies, a larger demand for scarce resources and mechanics for making transactions and assessing the value of those resources. Not all game economies use game money as the principal resource. Some economies are centered on Random Technical Items, some are based on ammunition supplies, some supply weapons and tools useful for other forms of goal achievement and some trade with “Macroeconomic units” (MEUs) of commodities, which are valued an order of magnitude beyond game money. The GMs of *Nanopunk: Tokyo* often discussed the game as an “angst economy,” as human emotion played a vital and quantifiable role in the game. Economies can be difficult to balance, as GMs must ensure that there are sufficient quantities of resources to make game-winning transactions feasible but not so much that they become trivial. However, the considerations involved in balancing economies are mostly numerical, which may be easier for the GMs’ to figure out.

Economies serve as systems that can generate conflict without the prescription of the GMs. If players realize that all the characters need more resources than they have in hand

to accomplish their goals, some will begin to antagonize each other for the sake of procuring supplies. The balance of individual character abilities becomes a concern in these scenarios, as a sufficiently powerful character might easily be able to eliminate random characters and seize their resources. Disincentives to this sort of approach may include player-controlled or GM-controlled law-enforcement, transaction mechanics that keep resources secure even when a character is dead or a character's psychological distaste of theft.

Beside economies, there are many other ways to generate character conflict without explicit instruction in the character packets of the players. Seduction mechanics may result in characters fighting over characters instead of resources. Alternatively, predisposing characters against certain kinds of stereotypical player actions may result in some interesting clashes. A player who attempts to gather a large number of people to accomplish a difficult task, for instance, may become a target for a character who suspects that large gatherings could be plots against the government. In many cases, GMs try to give players some chance of recognizing the potential danger of their actions.

### Rez Points, Killing Blows and Stealth Mechanics

Given the emphasis that Guild games have on attaining and securing goals, players often like to have access to some consistent and reliable means of ensuring that opposing characters stay out of their way once they have been removed. Otherwise, a game might either end in an unsatisfying standoff with no clear victor or be a foregone conclusion from the very beginning. Many games featuring rezzes thus provide a way to impede the

rate at which players can return to the game. A game featuring rapidly breeding aliens will often have a “queen” character that will stop breeding new creatures when killed. Other games have wall signs marking areas, known as “rez points,” where players of “dead” characters can rez. A rez point often represents some sort of portal that allows attacking characters to enter the game world. Players may be given a means of disabling the rez points or killing the queen character, thus stemming the flood of rezzing characters.

In other games, some characters may not die immediately after taking enough damage in the thick of combat. In the five to ten minutes that it takes for the character to die, the combat may end and victorious allies might administer medical aid. However, this would mean that players who are trying to dispose of their opposition in a quiet corner would have to guard their dying targets for five to ten minutes, a process that wastes time and discourages risk-taking among players.

To address this issue, the Standard Rules<sup>53</sup> includes a means for players to ensure that a character is dead. This is known as a “Killing Blow,” a mechanic that represents the willful, quick and certain termination of a character’s life.

Any Character not in a position to resist—immobile or unconscious—may be killed almost instantly. To do this, be within Zone of Control and declare “*Killing Blow*” towards your victim. Anyone within ZoC of you or your victim

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<sup>53</sup> Morris, J. E. & the MIT Assassins’ Guild. (2002) Standard Rules for MIT Assassins’ Guild games. Cambridge, MA.

who can move can stop you; the rescuing Player just says “No” or “stop” or “I prevent you” or *anything* indicating that you are opposed, within two seconds.

The Killing Blow and medical mechanics make possible the coexistence of the ability of characters to minimize casualties in combats by assembling multiple allies and opportunities for clean, quiet assassinations. This has also allowed GMs to add powerful characters that would require multiple assailants to assassinate with any reasonable probability of success. In games with cohesive groups that are transparent to the members of the group, players could potentially coordinate their groups to deal with excessively dangerous individual characters. However, with more complicated group structures featuring questionable loyalties among members, GMs have found it necessary to find ways to allow individual players to take down their opponents, no matter how outclassed the assailants may be.

Instead of removing powerful characters from the rosters of games, however, GMs have recently relied on stealth mechanics to achieve these affects. These combine competitive and verisimilar tensions to represent characters attacking characters by surprise. Players are required to hold an easily recognizable hand sign behind another player’s head for a few seconds. If the victim fails to notice the hand during that time, the attacker immediately declares a successful *mêlée* attack, regardless of the victim’s combat ability. Once the victim is incapacitated, the attacker can perform a Killing Blow.

Stealth mechanics encourage players to form alliances with their opposition to maximize opportunities for catching their enemies off guard. In that sense, individual players can be far more deadly than an easily noticed group of assailants. Instead of attempting to display their strength in numbers, groups spread out their members and confer in secret to prevent targets from noticing affiliations and becoming suspicious.

Rez points, Killing Blows and stealth mechanics are relatively simple mechanics in concept and implementation. However, they can all dramatically change the attitude and strategies that players can adopt in their efforts to achieve their characters' goals. They also provide new angles for GMs to explore in their aim to design and balance mechanics and systems that players will enjoy competing over.

### But Who Won?

Whether players are competing in combat, over economies, using governmental procedures or running in dog races, competitive mechanics need to return an unequivocal result at the end of the contest. Without providing a timely resolution, many Guild players would consider their efforts to be pointless or unfinished. A round of combat often ends with one or more characters incapacitated, perhaps dead. The survivors are either routed or victorious, giving them the opportunity to engage in another competition at a later time. With economies, the character either has the necessary resources or not; after all the trades and transactions, the bottom line looks at whether the character actually possesses what he or she needs to fulfill the goals of the game. Governmental procedures largely affect the ability of players to accomplish further tasks; without a

successful run through the gauntlet of bureaucracy and procedure, players will find themselves at a noticeable disadvantage.

Once the players who engage in a competitive mechanic become aware of the results, they then know the changes in the circumstances of the game as a result of the competition. Only with this new information can players make further informed decisions regarding the actions of their characters and their groups, thus allowing the game to progress.

## Future Directions and Credits

This thesis captures a snapshot of game design from a particular time in the history of the MIT Assassins' Guild. Snapshots attempt to capture and fix the state of a changing environment from a single point of view. With the knowledge that a creative environment changes rapidly, a single snapshot is a poor roadmap for future paths. On their own, snapshots do not have any predictive or even prescriptive use. Of course, the analysis of a series of snapshots or multiple snapshots of the same environment might be useful for a variety of generalized analyses. It is my hope that this thesis might eventually prove useful for someone else's broad analysis of game design. It is also my wish that other writers, well versed in other forms of gaming, may produce snapshots of their respective fields of expertise.

The practices and examples included in this thesis are specific to the MIT Assassins' Guild. However, those working in the design of live-action simulation or gaming for recreational or educational purposes may find some applicability for these ideas. Circumstances will always be different with other implementations. This opens up the potential of new solutions for many of the same questions faced by the Guild. The tensions described in this thesis should be seen as opportunities, rather than roadblocks, for the purposes of producing even more compelling, innovative and varied interactive experiences.

For instance, a number of different groups have been working on using Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) to facilitate "augmented reality" simulations, which can be understood

as live-action roleplaying with the addition of portable computers. Computers can hide, exchange and reveal information without the explicit interaction or knowledge of players and can also be multipurpose, detailed threshold objects. PDA-mediated mechanics can also cause very little disruption to non-players. Indeed, bystanders may not even notice a PDA-facilitated game in progress. Networked computers can reflect global state variables that players can manipulate from multiple locations. MIT is currently developing a toolkit for non-programmers to implement this sort of functionality on PDAs,<sup>54</sup> although not many groups can afford to supply all participants with compatible handheld computers. All these have significant implications for the tensions of information, verisimilitude, dissociation, competition and feasibility respectively, and I hope to explore these possibilities in the near future.

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<sup>54</sup> Klopfer, E. & Squire, K. (April 2003) Augmented Reality on PDAs. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL,

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## Appendix A: *Nanopunk: Tokyo* E-mail Application

This is the body of a text electronic mail sent to members of the MIT Assassins' Guild for collecting information for casting from interested players.

\*\*\* IEN Node 2 \*\*\* ShinichiH \*\*\* Cloud download - Continue \*\*\*  
known as Sakasama, The Inversion, the event proved to be the most catastrophic event in the history of Japan since the Tenmei Famine of 1783. 75% of the population of Tokyo was evacuated into the giant underground cavern (BRANCH INDEX: Geo-Tokyo) prior to the event, a move that proved costly after the invaders retaliated by sealing the cavern by raising, inverting, dropping and irradiating metropolitan Tokyo on top of the cavern. A hundred meters of granite between the Tokyo and the cavern kept the radiation inside the cavern within survivable levels, although debris falling through the one-kilometer height of the cavern resulted in heavy casualties among the mostly civilian evacuees.

Reinforcement of the cavern ceiling was the first step towards reconstruction. However, equally pressing was the need to house and feed over 50 million \*\*\* IEN CHATPROMPT: SakuraM \*\*

^.^ Still busy?  
^\_^ Yeah, I'm getting ready for the history test.  
^.^ Boy, you're hardcore. Take a break, dude. We're heading out to the club. Are you gonna be there?  
^\_^ Geez, I'm really behind...who else is going?  
^.^ Nozomi, and Kazuo, and Rena. Mina-chan can't get past her dad tonight, though.  
^\_^ Not the whole gang, huh...I dunno.  
^.^ C'mon. Aiko Mitsuharu's going to be singing tonight.  
^\_^ Okay, okay. It'll take me a little while to get to the train station, so I'll be there in an hour or so.  
^.^ Suddenly lost interest in history, eh?  
^\_^ Gimme a break. I've been diving for the past hour and it's been nothing but work work work.  
^.^ Okay, okay, we're going in stripes tonight. You got anything to wear?  
^\_^ Yeah, I'm set. I should get changed now if I want to catch the show.  
    Call me if Minato changes her mind, huh? I could pass by her place.  
^.^ Yeah, but her dad's locked her diveboard, even. It's not going to

happen tonight.  
^\_^ Oh, okay. I'm out of here.  
\*\*\* DETACHED: ShinichiH \*\*\*  
^.^ ...'cos I didn't tell her.

---

NANOPUNK:TOKYO  
THE INVERTED METROPOLIS  
January 17-25th  
by Jennifer Clay, Eddy Karat, Jay Muchnij and Philip Tan

Nanopunk:Tokyo is a 10-day, high-roleplaying Assassin game based on Japanese pop culture and previous Nanopunk games run by the MIT Assassins' Guild. The game is set in Geo-Tokyo, a gigantic, hermetic underground city in Japan, 2089, where advanced nanotechnology combined with traditional martial arts have turned the streets into a dangerous urban jungle where gang members, hackers and shadowrunners rule by strength and honor. 10-foot-tall mechs move between the rugged cavern walls and the city streets, past Shinto and Buddhist temples, nightclubs, factories and towering buildings.

A city of light in perpetual night, living in it can be depressing, but the denizens of Geo-Tokyo find their own reasons to survive in this futuristic dystopia. Entertainers and spiritual leaders have their followings, helping people see beyond their dire circumstances. Scientists struggle to maximize the limited resources of the city, while students tend to be pretty much oblivious to everything except their exams and that dreamboat sitting two desks over.

Roleplay, interact, outwit and scheme with others as you assume the role of one of 60 million inhabitants of Geo-Tokyo. Send apps to [tokyo-gms@mit.edu](mailto:tokyo-gms@mit.edu). Note that as soon as we get enough apps, we'll cast the game, and you'll get costuming information that much earlier. Yes, we encourage costuming. So app quickly, preferably before you leave for vacation.

---

Required Information:

\*\*\*\*\*

Name:

Email:

Gender:

Phone Number:

Do you have an answering machine?

... a roommate?

Is he/she/it planning on playing in our game?

times not to call?  
(default is 12am-8am)

How much assassin experience do you have? Who have you played in your last three games? (This is so we can remember who you are, not an assessment of your past play.)

Are there any times during the game when you will not be available? (i.e, going away for the weekend, working 8-midnight every weeknight, etc)

About how much time do you expect to spend playing? Do you have other specific commitments?

What do you want to play?

Do you mind being crosscast (having a character whose gender is not your own)?

Do you have access to MIT's campus Athena computer clusters?

We may have some need for NPC's. If we don't cast you as a PC, would you be interested in playing an NPC part?

Optional stuff that will help us cast you:

\*\*\*\*\*

When the rest of game has interrupted the peace conference to try to stop Cthulhu from destroying the world, would you prefer to join in and try to save the world or would you rather find your lost dog, Totoro?

Do you mind playing a thoroughly deluded character?

Which typical assassin methods of accomplishing plot can't you stand? (some examples: Running about trying to get stuff done all over campus while avoiding interference. Convincing other people to win your plot for you. Outplaying someone else in a mechanic. Killing off your opposition. etc...)

How much anime have you watched? How about Japanese TV shows and computer games? (Final Fantasy and Nintendo don't count)

What anime archetypes would you be psyched to play in game? What ones would you hate to play?

What motivations would really work for a character you were playing?

What motivations would really not work for a character you were playing?

Do you like schtick? If so, what kind of schtick do you like?

What level of angst are you happy dealing with in a character? What about romantic angst?

How do you feel about public speaking, singing or dancing in front of other players?

To what degree are you willing to costume? What sort of costuming do you think you'd be able to do?

What would make you turn in your packet?

-----

Please send completed apps to [tokyo-gms@mit.edu](mailto:tokyo-gms@mit.edu). Thanks!

## Appendix B: Rules Code for *A New Deal*

This is the page-formatting code of the rules and scenario for the second run of *A New Deal*, a 3-day game I wrote and ran in 2002. I was using the *GameTeX* tool suite developed by Van K. Clary.

```
\documentclass[sheet]{game}
%% document-wide tweaks
\setstretch{1}
\def\mytype{Basic Rules}
\lfoot{}\rfoot{}

\begin{document}
%% cover page
\thispagestyle{empty}
\parindent0pt
\parskip0pt

\begin{center}\LARGE\bf\begin{tabular}{|c|}
 \hline \gamename\ \ gamedate\ \ Basic Rules\ \ \hline
\end{tabular}\end{center}

\vfill\vfill
```

The following are the rules for {\em\gamename}, a real-time, real-space roleplaying game sponsored by the MIT Assassins' Guild. You are responsible for knowing these rules. Many of them are high-impossible to enforce and rely upon the honor system. A game is supposed to be fun. It's no fun to win by cheating. Playing loopholes in these rules is likewise not permitted. Play fair. Be your own harshest critic.

```
\vfill
```

The {\bf gamemasters} ({\bf GMs}) run the game; rulings they make are final. They promise to be as fair and reasonable as they can; neither the GMs nor these rules are perfect. If you are unsure how to proceed, if you have any doubt that what you want to do is considered fair and legal, if you are unhappy about how the game is going, or if you have any questions, contact a GM.

```
\vfill
```

This is only a game. Everyone involved should act with courtesy, sportsmanship, patience, and taste. The game does not give you the right to do in reality anything normally prohibited by legality or morality. The GMs may expel anyone they believe to be violating the spirit of the rules or the game. Emotions may run high; if you think things are crossing the line from game to reality too much, or if you are just getting too stressed, calm down and maybe take a break. Stay in control. Use common sense. Always, play safely, then play to have fun.

\vfill

This game is a work of fiction. Although it may refer to things in the real world, it does so only for the sake of the scenario. It is not meant to make any sort of political, social, economic, religious, philosophical, technological, governmental, revolutionary, or geographic comment and does not represent the GMs' personal opinions. These rules are modifications of those used in previous games. This game and all materials thereof are copyright \the\year\ by \EVERY{GM}{\MYfullname, }and the MIT Assassins' Guild.

\vfill\vfill

\begin{center}\bf  
BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE MIT ASSASSINS' GUILD \\  
AND 21L.433 FILM STYLES AND GENRES\<\  
With thanks to Ken Clary for GameTeX beta 2  
\end{center}

\vfill

\clearpage  
%% Table of Contents page  
\thispagestyle{empty}  
\tableofcontents  
\clearpage  
\setcounter{page}{1}  
\parskip5pt

\section{Scenario}

``...and that was `Love is Where You Find It,' by Frank Sinatra, from his latest film. You're tuned into NBC-Chicago, WMAQ. It's 5:05 in Chicago and time for ``News on the Spot,' news and interviews recorded on the street and rushed to our studios for broadcast at this time. And now, here's Len O'Connor.''

``Today, we bring you an interview with an ordinary man who has had an

extraordinary day. Mr. John Donowitz, a man who runs a hot-dog stand on the corner of Randolph and LaSalle in the Loop, across from the Palace Theater and practically underneath the thundering rails of the 'L.' Mr. Donowitz, what can you tell us about your day?''

``s not much, I pull my cart out around 6 in the morning, so's the guys heading out to the factories around Lake kin get something for their boxes. It's not an hour for decent people to be up an' about, but I've been doing this since '42, and after six years, you jus' get used to it.''

``So, what can you tell us about what happened to you this morning?''

``Well, I was comin' round the corner from Madison, when I sees this black car barrelin' down Clark, right into one of 'em lamp posts. Made a real big {\bf bam!} and then it was all quiet. The car wasn't too beat up but the windows were all broke. First thing I thought, someone's in a real hurry this mornin'. Then I figured, maybe someone's hurt in there. So I pushed my cart over to that side of the street.''

``But that wasn't all, was it, Mr. Donowitz?''

``Then, wasn't a minute later, another car comes up in an all-fired rush, and just darn near rammed into the first car. But they didn't, and this guy comes out of the car and looks in the windows of the first one. So I figure, mebbe there was someone still alive in there, so I shout 'You need help?'''

``Then the guy pulls out this gat and fires at me for no good reason, so I grab my cart and bolt down the street, 'cause he certainly didn't want me hangin' around there. I just glad he's a lousy shot.''

``That was John Donowitz, giving us a first-hand account of his dangerous experience this morning, downtown. Police found the black car as you have heard Donowitz describe it, empty and with what appeared to be bullet holes in the body. We managed to get a few words out from the Police Commissioner in the afternoon. Commissioner, can you shed some light on the automobile accident that occurred at Madison and Clark this morning?''

``It's not complicated. The driver of the car probably had the sun in his eyes and didn't see the lamp post until he hit it. We're still investigating the other car. If your listeners know anything, they should contact the police. Right now...our guess was that it was just some opportunist who tried to steal something from the damaged car.''

``A witness to the accident said the driver of the second car fired a

gun at him. Some have suggested that this might be some sort of gangland-related incident. What do you think?''

``Bunk. Let me assure you that there has been little organized criminal activity in the city of Chicago since 1932, since Alphonse Capone went up the river. Besides, this is just a automobile accident, not a bank robbery. Some people think `mobsters' are behind everything bad in this city. Now, there's plenty of crooks out there but that doesn't mean they're working together. I bet most of them hate each other.''

``The Commissioner, giving an official view on the automobile accident in the Loop this morning and a personal angle on crime in Chicago. You're listening to NBC-Chicago's ``News on the Spot'' on WMAQ, and I'm Len O'Connor. While we were gathering these interviews, we managed to run into Virgil Peterson who was leaving from City Hall, after a meeting with Mayor Kennelly. Mr. Peterson is the executive director of the Chicago Crime Commission and he works for the FBI. Mr. Peterson, if you can spare a few minutes, what do you have to say about crime in Chicago?''

``What do I have to say? It's a lot bigger and goes a lot deeper than people admit. I don't think there's a street in Chicago where someone isn't running a scam, or trying to make a dishonest buck, or God forbid, getting shot. Sometimes I think crime's the city's biggest industry.''

``Mr. Peterson, are you calling all of us, the citizens of Chicago, crooks?''

``No, just the person next to you.''

``That was Virgil Peterson of the FBI. I'm Len O'Connor for NBC-Chicago, and you have been listening to ``News on the Spot.''  
Next, we will be bringing you the latest on the Cubs. Back to you, Judith.''

%"Values have shrunken to fantastic levels; taxes have risen; our %ability to pay has fallen; government of all kinds is faced by serious %curtailment of income; the means of exchange are frozen in the %currents of trade...a host of unemployed citizens face the grim %problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little %return. Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the %moment." -- Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 1933

\clearpage

\section{House Rules}

## \subsection{Character Packets}

Your character packet is a big manila envelope. It contains your role: who you are, what you're up to; everything about your part as a {\bf player-character} ({\bf PC}) in the game. Read all the contents and generally keep them with you during the game. If you are missing something or find something which doesn't seem to belong to you, tell one of the GMs. Character packets are confidential. Game materials which cannot be given to other players are marked ``Not Transferable,''' whereas things which can be given to others are marked ``Freely Transferable'' or ``Game Item.''

\paragraph{Name-Badge:} A name-badge with your player name, character name and {\bf badge number} on it shows that you are in the game; wear it visibly while you are playing. It represents your character's body in-game. Badge numbers are not in-game information. See the {\em Character Bodies} and {\em Badge Numbers} sections for more details.

\paragraph{Character Sheet:} Your character sheet describes who you are and what you are up to. It contains a list of everything else that should be in your character packet. Do not show or read your character sheet to other players.

\paragraph{Bluesheets:} A bluesheet describes information common to members of a group. When in conflict, character sheet information overrides bluesheet information. Do not show or read a bluesheet to other players.

\paragraph{Greensheets:} A greensheet describes and expands abilities, mechanics or in-game knowledge. Do not show or read a greensheet to other players.

\paragraph{Stat Card:} Your stat card lists your statistics. You might not know what all of your stats mean. Do not show your stats to others. The reverse side is a {\bf death report}; fill it out and give it to the GMs when your character dies.

\paragraph{Ability Cards:} An ability card explains a special ability your character has. The front side describes the effects; show it to players when you use the ability. The reverse is the rules of use and must not be shown to other players.

\paragraph{Memory Packets:} A memory packet is an envelope or stapled piece of paper with a {\bf trigger} which describes when to open and read it. If the trigger is a number, open the packet when you see something with that number. If it's a quoted phrase, open when you hear or read it in-game. If it's a symbol, open when instructed. Do

not take game action based on an unopened trigger. Do not show or read a memory packet to other players.

`\paragraph{Items:}` In-game items may be transferred from character to character, and should be marked as such. See the `{\em Dealing with Items}` section for more details.

`\paragraph{Scenario:}` A scenario gives you general knowledge of the game and its setting.

`\subsection{Reality and Game Reality}`

There is a big difference between reality and game reality. Players must treat each other with courtesy and explain to each other what their characters perceive in confusing situations; e.g. `\ ``My character's hands are covered in blood,'` an `{\bf out-of-game}` statement. Characters are under no such restrictions, and may do what it takes to further their goals; e.g. `\ ``Uh, hi Bob. Just got back from the butcher shop,'` an `{\bf in-game}` statement.

`{\bf Metagaming}` is inferring in-game knowledge that is inappropriate for your character from out-of-game information. Do your best to not metagame and to prevent the risk of metagaming. Be your own harshest critic.

`\paragraph{Halts:}` A halt pauses game action. To call one, say `\ ``game halt'` in a clear and audible voice; other players around a corner should hear you, but you shouldn't scare some poor grad student. End a halt by saying `\ ``three, two, one, resume.'` Call a halt for one of only three reasons: because a rule instructs you to, for safety and similar out-of-game issues, or to pause game and fetch a GM (which you should avoid).

`\paragraph{Not-Here:}` You may go not-here by turning your name-badge around so the `\ ``I'm Not Here'` side is showing (or by removing your badge entirely, if you are leaving game). Putting a hand on your head, visible from a distance, helps if you're near other players. Go not-here for one of only three reasons: because a rule instructs you to, to leave game, or to fetch a GM while in a halt (which you should avoid).

When you are not-here, your character is not there. Your character cannot see, hear or remember any game actions or information that you, the player, may encounter. Avoid other characters, common game areas, game signs, or any sort of game interaction. To leave or enter game for a significant duration of time, walk out of the game area, then remove your name badge. Don't go not-here in front of other characters; give them a fair chance to interact with you.

**Observers and GM helpers:** An observer is someone not playing the game. They usually wear white headbands. Observers have traditionally been called ``ghosts.'' They should stay out of the way; you can normally ask an observer to leave if you wish. If someone who is not playing wants to observe the game, send them to the GMs. An observer with a yellow headband and a black badge is helping the GMs run mechanics, so do not ask them to leave, although you may ask them to move out of your way.

**Non-Player-Characters:** Non-player-characters (**NPCs**) are characters in the game's universe not played by a full-time player. They are minor characters, bit parts, or random people. Some may have name-badges similar to those worn by PCs. Some may be wearing colored headbands denoting a certain sort of in-game uniform.

**Non-Players:** Not everyone in the world is playing in this game. Some non-players (**NPs**) like to study undisturbed; others just don't like having toy guns waved in their faces. You are encouraged to spread the gospel of real-time, real-space roleplaying; however, use tact and common sense when dealing with NPs.

NPs may not knowingly affect the game. They may not be used to hold items or information, nor can anything be hidden in a NP's room. They may not help you kill someone, much less blow up a bomb for you. Do not use the presence of NPs to hide from rampaging mobs that want your blood.

Avoid conspicuous or threatening game actions in front of NPs. Shooting your friend outside of a classroom one minute before class lets out is a bad idea, as is screaming bloody murder down a hallway. If, despite your most valiant efforts, some NPs do get upset, call the GMs who will help calm them down.

**Mechanics:** Many actions your character can take, such as walking, talking, and general interaction with other characters, are represented by you doing them. Some things, like combat, are performed via abstract mechanics, which are described in ability cards, greensheets, and rules. The abstract information for mechanics (like badge numbers) may not be discussed in-game. If you want to do something special for which there is no mechanic, ask a GM.

Become familiar with your mechanics before game starts, especially for those which occur under time-pressure (including combat). Game action will not stop for memory packets, greensheets, or such.

A **kludge** (and derivative forms like ``kludge-ite'') is something impervious to logic and cleverness, usually for game-balance. You

can't affect a kludge without a specified mechanic.

**Zone of Control** (**ZoC**) is a rough distance measurement. You are within ZoC of someone if your outstretched fingers can touch their outstretched fingers.

**Safety:** This is a game. Real violence is unacceptable. Game action should cause no real-world damage, either to people or property. If something dangerous is happening, call a halt. Stay in control, use common sense, and do not endanger yourself or others. You should not run or otherwise force your way into or through someone else's ZoC, and you should never make physical contact with another player without permission.

**Roleplaying**

**Act with personality, not with unnecessary caution.** This game emphasizes roleplaying and acting over strategic or 'smart' gaming. Players should be more concerned with getting into character and portraying personality to other players. Always try to consider what your character would do on impulse, given his or her temperament and situation. If it is in conflict with what would be a 'wise' course of action as a player, choose the former. Avoid isolating yourself from other players; get others involved in your plans, and engage heavily in conversation.

**Let your goals change as you encounter new information.** Your character sheet only specifies what you are interested in at the beginning of the game and what happened to you prior to the game. It also defines your character's temperament and personality. Within these perimeters, you are encouraged to get involved in other plots and events occurring within the game. Do not abandon your given plots, but take the risk to supplement them. A player that gets his or her character embroiled with everything interesting in game will have a far more interesting time than one who sticks strictly to their stated goals in their sheet. It is acceptable and preferable to lose your stated goals if you do so in character and in style.

**This is a film noir game.** Film noir characters are rarely particularly intelligent or cognizant of dangerous situations. They are often arrogant, impulsive, self-serving and jealous. Your character should not be lighthearted and happy by the end of the game (although the player should try to have fun). If your character is killed in game and leave behind an enigmatic or gory corpse, that's a very good thing.

%\clearpage

\section{Dealing with items}

Many in-game items are represented by little white cards with a number and description. Item cards may be shown to others, passed around, stolen, etc. The **item number** on the card is not in-game information and *may not be recorded or discussed*. Not all in-game items have cards or numbers; whatever they are represented by should be clearly marked *'in-game item'* or *'freely transferable.'* You cannot remove or destroy most items or item cards in the game.

Use common sense. You can't carry a hundred rocks in your pocket, fold a sword in half, or hide a life-sized statue in a fire hose. You can't stop a bullet with a set of blueprints or rip apart a metal safe with your bare hands. Even if your bag can carry a shovel in it, the shovel noticeably sticks out (*'you see a shovel sticking out of my bag'*).

**Written Information:** If you write in-game information down on a piece of paper, that paper is now an in-game item and must be clearly marked as such. Don't write in-game information on out-of-game documents (like your character sheet). Don't write out-of-game information (like memory packet triggers) on in-game documents. You can shred items or item cards representing in-game paper documents; dispose of the shreds in wastebaskets in classrooms reserved for the game. You can reconstitute shredded documents by finding and reassembling the shreds.

**Envelopes:** Some items and locations may have an attached envelope (or just be a labeled packet or folded paper). The envelope may include directions for when to open these (*'open packet if you press the big red button'* or *'open packet if you eat this'*); otherwise you may only open them if and when instructed.

**Signs:** Some locations and other game materials are represented by signs or packets posted throughout game area. You may read any signs and must follow any rules printed on them. If a sign or packet doesn't have some sort of in-game description (it only has out-of-game mechanics information, like a number or just a colored dot), then your character doesn't even see it or know that anything unusual is there. **Do not record or memorize the mechanics information on signs.**

**Bulkiness:** A bulky item is too big or heavy to be carried or concealed freely. Bulkiness is measured in **hands** or **dots** (how many hands it takes to carry it). If you are carrying a bulky item represented by a card, make it clear to onlookers by holding the card. A hand carrying a bulky object may do nothing else. You may drag a bulky item at a slow pace if you have one hand less than required.

\paragraph{Character Bodies:} A body is two hands bulky and usually represented by a name-badge. It must be willing or unable to resist for you to carry it. Carry the badge conspicuously. Onlookers can't tell if it's dead without close examination, unless it's extremely obvious obvious (like headless).

\paragraph{Props:} Some items may have props (physical representations or {\bf physreps}) associated with them. The card and physrep should be kept together. If they are separated, the card is the real item. Prop items are as bulky as the physrep. They can be carried in bags that can hold them, on straps that are attached to them, etc.

\paragraph{Containers:} Some items, like crates or personal bags, have a {\bf capacity}. Capacity is measured in dots or hands; this is how many dots of items can be stored within. You can put as many non-bulky items inside as is within reason. A container may have a capacity bigger than its bulkiness; use common sense when nesting containers. Put contained item cards inside the envelope attached to the container card.

\paragraph{Bags:}

If you would like to have a bag in game, bring your own bag. In-game bags can hold up to 4-hands of bulky items, assuming that the physreps can actually fit in a bag. Bags can also hold any number of nonbulky, nonphysrepped items.

\subsection{Searching and Stashing}

\paragraph{Places:} To search a classroom, search it. Normal items can be stashed in any reasonable, legal place in a reserved classroom. Don't stash items in places that are not classrooms specifically reserved for game; see the {\em Game Areas} section for more information. Don't put items behind locked doors, inside ceilings, in construction sites, or in hacking locations; consequently, don't go rummaging through such places for game items.

Note that the GMs may plant items or information in locations outside of the reserved classrooms but generally within Game Areas. These will either be obvious (visible to passers-by) or players will be given specific information on where to find them. As long as characters are within Game Areas, feel free to tail and follow others in order to discover secret locations.

In order to hide a prop item, you need to conceal the physrep in a location large enough to hide the entire physrep; if a physrep is made

of foam, do not squash the physrep to force it to fit into a smaller stash site.

`\paragraph{People:}` All searches of characters or their belongings are conducted via player dialogue. Someone must be willing or unable to resist for you to search them. Anyone within ZoC of either you or your victim can prevent the search by saying ``I stop you'' or an equivalent phrase.

You can perform a `{\bf pat-down search}`, which will only reveal the presence of weapons. You need at least one free hand to perform a pat-down search. Say ``I search you for weapons'' to the person you are searching. This takes as much time as it takes your victim to tell you what you find. If you're the victim, do this at a reasonable pace.

A `{\bf total search}` is an invasive, complete search of a character's clothing. You need at least two free hands to perform a total search. Say ``I search you completely'' to the person you are searching. This reveals all in-game items, and takes as long as your victim spends handing over possessions. If you're the victim, hand over items at a reasonable pace.

`\paragraph{Bags:}` To search a bag that is obviously in-game (has an attached, displayed item card), search the physrep. To declare a bag out-of-game, make sure it has ``no game items'' prominently labelled on the exterior of the bag. Item cards in the bag must be in reasonable places, i.e. not inside secret compartments in the bag. All in-game bags must be fully in-game. If you wish to carry personal effects in an in-game bag, keep them in a removable pouch or envelope and label it ``no game items.'' If you are about to be separated from your bag for in-game reasons, you may first remove the pouch from your bag to keep it with you. Do not use this as an opportunity to surreptitiously take or remove in-game items from your bag.

To search an attended bag, say ``I search this bag'' to the owner. You only need one free hand to search a bag. If the owner is willing or unable to resist, the owner should hand over all game items inside at a reasonable pace.

Alternatively, simply hand over the entire bag. Note that many characters will be unable to hold a weapon, a bag and perform a search at the same time; feel free to take advantage of such an opportunity.

`\subsection{Money, Food and Drinks}`

In 1948, the dollar was approximately 10 times its value today. Food in this game is mostly pizza, represented by actual pizza. You

will find it in {\em Mama Accardo's Ristorante} in game. Take advantage of in-game food as much as possible during game; inform the GMs of any dietary restrictions if you haven't already done so. Food may be purchased using in-game money. A large meal costs \\$5, while a small meal costs \\$2.

Alcoholic drinks at the {\em The City Hall Bar} are represented by fruit juices. Don't call the drinks by their non-alcoholic names, e.g. if your character is drinking wine, refer to the drink as wine. The appropriate names will be listed in the bar and the restaurant. Take advantage of in-game drinks as much as possible during game. If the bar is open but the bartender isn't around, you can serve yourself a drink from the NPC bartender. Tip the PC or NPC bartender \\$1 if you can afford a drink; ask for a tab if you can't.

### \subsection{Mickey Finns}

You can 'slip a mickey' into someone's drink if you have the opportunity and the motive. Mickey Finns are knockout drugs represented by a measure of powdered salt wrapped in paper. To use it, simply add the salt into a person's drink. Mickey Finns only work in drinks. All characters have access to Mickey Finns; players should bring their own salt. You can dispose of unused Mickey Finns in any trashcan.

If you imbibe a drink that is unusually salty, your character becomes extremely sleepy and wants to sit down as quickly as possible. Once seated, you are knocked out for the next five minutes. Do not noisily broadcast the fact that you are knocked out; just close your eyes and slump. Lay your head on a table if you have one in front of you.

### \subsection{Poker Cards}

{\bf All players will need to have a full deck of poker cards without any jokers.} These are not in-game items and you should not remove them from other characters, neither should you distinguish them from any other deck of cards. Use the poker cards for mechanics that require a certain amount of chance. If you wish, you may use the same cards to play a game of cards with other characters; be sure that the owner of the deck regains possession of all the cards when the card game is over.

The basic chance mechanic is based on five-card draw poker. Shuffle the deck thoroughly before beginning and keep the deck face-down. Draw the top five cards from the deck and place them face-up. A mechanic that requires chance will indicate a certain poker hand, such as {\bf Hand: Straight}. You need to make the five cards show a hand that equals or betters the value of the stated hand. If they already show

you a winning hand, you succeed in performing the mechanic.

If you do not have a winning hand, choose one to five of the face-up cards to reject. Place those cards face-down in a discard pile and draw the same number of cards from the top of the deck. Turn the new cards face up. If you now have a winning hand, you succeed in performing the mechanic. If not, discard all the face-up cards and draw five new cards from the top of the deck, repeating the mechanic from the beginning.

If you run out of cards in the deck without forming a winning hand, or if you choose to stop performing the mechanic, you have failed at the mechanic. Unless you know otherwise, you may not attempt that particular mechanic for the rest of the game. If you can make a second attempt, reshuffle the deck well before restarting.

The hands are listed below in descending order of value:

**Royal Flush:**

A, K, Q, J, 10 all of the same suit.\

**Straight Flush:**

Any five card sequence in the same suit. (e.g. 8, 9, 10, J, Q or A, 2, 3, 4, 5 of same suit)\

**Four of a Kind:**

All four cards of the same index (e.g. K, K, K, K)\

**Full House:**

Three of a kind combined with a pair (e.g. A, A, A, 5, 5)\

**Flush:**

Any five cards of the same suit, but not in sequence.\

**Straight:**

Five cards in sequence, but not in the same suit.\

**Three of a Kind:**

Three cards of the same index.\

**Two Pair:**

Two separate pairs (Ex: 4, 4, Q, Q).\

**Pair:**

Two cards of the same index.

**Doors and Locks**

In-game locks will have a lock letter printed on the card. Classroom doors that can be locked should have a similar letter displayed on the door. To open the lock, you need a key with the same letter. If a lock is closed, assume it is locked. Doors can only be locked from the outside; you cannot keep a mobile person locked in a room.

**Lock busting:** Locks and doors will also have a poker hand displayed on the card. Anyone may attempt to bust a lock by using the basic poker chance mechanic to **beat** the hand displayed on the

lock. Most doors will require you to beat a full-house; high-security doors or locks may require better hands. Once you succeed, the lock breaks and cannot be locked again. Indicate the status of a busted lock by drawing a large X on the item card or sign.

If you fail to break the lock, you may attempt to break the same lock after fifteen minutes.

`\paragraph{Lockpicking:}` Certain characters may be able to perform lockpicking if they have a lockpick. If you have such an ability, use the basic poker chance mechanic to `{\bf beat or equal}` the hand displayed on the lock. A picked lock will lock again once it is closed. If you fail to pick the lock, you may attempt to pick the same lock after fifteen minutes.

`\section{Gambling with Love}`

Love plots in this game use the cards in a slightly different manner. When not performing a mechanic that requires a full deck, you should always keep one card from the deck separate from the rest. This is your `{\bf Mood}` card. Do not show anyone the card. You may return the card to your deck and draw a new card at any time as long as no one is currently attempting to seduce you. You can look through your cards to pick a specific card if you wish.

All characters in this game are pretty good-looking and are interested in Flirting with any character of the opposite sex. The second digit on a name badge represents relative attractiveness; if given the option to Flirt with two characters, first Flirt with the character with greater attractiveness. If you're shot down, feel free to go after the other character. If you haven't Flirted with anyone by the end of the game, you're not playing this game right. Roleplay accordingly.

Due to the Hays Motion Picture Production Code of 1930s, there are no homosexual relationships depicted in this game.

`\subsection{Flirtation}`

Initiating romantic involvement between characters begins with Flirtation, which does not involve the use of any cards. You first need to Flirt with him or her by striking up conversation with a corny opening line. The person being Flirted with needs to respond with a witty retort. If the person responds with a non-witty response, you were probably too subtle. Remember that film flirtation in the 40's was never terribly subtle; crank up the chutzpah and try again.

If someone is trying to Flirt with you, you need to respond with a witty one-liner within five seconds by turning the flirter's opening

line against him or herself or by coming up with some inventive insult. You decide if your own response was good enough. Be strict with yourself. Do not attack the person flirting with you; you're too distracted by their charms. The first person who fails to come up with a witty retort within five seconds of the last response loses the Flirtation. If you lose a Flirtation, you cannot attempt to flirt with the same person for the half-hour. If you win a Flirtation, you may have the option of attempting to Seduce the other character.

If a Flirtation is interrupted, the last person to get in a witty retort automatically wins the Flirtation. However, if the interruption is extremely trivial (say, a passing PC asks to get by you), feel free to ignore the interruption. If someone succeeds in Flirting with you, your character is now somewhat romantically intrigued by the Flirt.

#### \subsection{Seduction}

You may attempt to Seduce someone three times immediately after you win the most recent Flirtation. You may choose not to Seduce a character, even if you win a Flirtation. If someone is seducing you, replace your Mood card with a new, random card after every attempt at Seduction. Every failed attempt at seduction makes your character a little less interested in the flirt; brush the seducer away after three consecutive, unsuccessful Seductions. If you fail to seduce someone after three consecutive attempts, you will need to Flirt again before you can Seduce that person. If someone succeeds in Seducing you, your character becomes rather enamoured with the seducer; roleplay accordingly.

\paragraph{If your character is more attractive than the character you are trying to seduce,} draw a card from your deck and hold it up to the person you are trying to Seduce. Say ``suit.'' If the other player's Mood card has the same suit as the one you showed, you succeed in Seducing the other character.

\paragraph{If your character is less or equally attractive to the character you are trying to seduce,} draw a card from your deck and hold it up to the person you are trying to Seduce. Say ``number.'' If the other player's Mood card has the same number as the one you showed, regardless of suit, you succeed in Seducing the other character.

#### \subsection{Sex}

Sex should immediately follow a successful Seduction, although characters may mutually consent to have Sex without Seduction. They should still attempt to Flirt; remember that one person always wins a

Flirtation. Find an empty reserved classroom as soon as possible and close the door behind you two. If either of you are attacked en route, you do not have to perform the rest of this mechanic. You and another player should sit across a desk and use a single, full, well-shuffled deck belonging to the person who performed the successful Seduction.

The owner of the deck is the dealer and deals two cards to each player, one face-up and one face-down. You may always examine your own face-down card, also known as your hole card. Do not discuss the value of your hands verbally; hand gestures and facial expressions are fine. You may talk about anything else in-game during this process.

The game resembles Blackjack, in which you try to get a high collective value of cards without going over 21. Royal cards (Jack, Queen, King) are all worth 10 and the Ace can be worth 1 or 11, depending on what the holder of the Ace wishes it to be. The rest of the cards are all worth the number on the face of the cards. Both of you need to decide whether to 'hit' or 'stick,' i.e. whether to get a new card or to stay with the cards you already have, respectively. If you are not dealing, indicate this by pointing downwards at your cards; a single finger is a request to the dealer to 'hit' and several fingers is a request to 'stick.'

If you are the dealer and wish to 'hit' your own hand, deal to yourself before dealing to the other player. If the other player decides to 'stick', you may again decide to 'hit' or 'stick' with your own hand. Once either player decides to 'stick' with his or her hand, that player may no longer be dealt any new cards. If you 'bust,' that is, if the total value of your cards exceeds 21, you can only 'stick' with the cards you have. You do not need to declare that you are bust, although it may already be obvious from your face-up cards.

Once both players decide to 'stick' with their hands, both players simultaneously reveal their hole cards. If you have more than a total of 21, say 'bust' as you turn over your hold card. If not, declare the total value of your cards as you turn over your hole card.

You need to earn points in order to win at Sex. If you have a total of 21, you gain a point. If neither player busted, the player with the higher total gains a point. If neither player busted and had identical total card values, both players gain a point. If you bust, you {em lose} a point.

If you are the first player to reach 3 points, you win; the other character falls desperately in love with you. You should not attempt to directly hurt this character for the rest of game but you may place him or her in danger or attempt to Flirt with another character. If you were trying to make the other character fall in love with you, you

have succeeded.

If you fall in love with another character after losing at Sex, you may not attempt to seduce any other character, hurt your new partner or knowingly place him or her in danger for the rest of game. If both players reach 3 points simultaneously, both characters fall in desperately in love with each other.

If both players have less than -3 points, the sex ends badly! You both have an unsatisfactory sexual episode and neither of you should attempt to Flirt or have Sex with each other for the rest of game. Your characters get mad at each other; feel free to hurt each other after 15 minutes of amnesty, if it makes sense for your character.

Before dealing the next hand, the dealer should reshuffle all the cards back into the deck if there are approximately less than a dozen cards left in the deck. The other player should cut the deck. You should continue playing Blackjack until you win or lose. If you are interrupted by other players, you should halt the Sex. Neither of you should initiate Flirtation, Seduction or Sex for the next half-hour. Others may attempt to do the same to you.

#### \section{Sleight of Hand}

If you enter a basement, your character is sneaking across a roof, or shimmying up a pipe, scaling a wall, or generally being in a place where being present would be illegal, according to the Chicago Police. Getting out of these places is just as hard as it is to get into one. Moving from one building basement to another will typically involve a bit of physical dexterity and luck. Signs in basements will indicate where you can go from a particular basement and what you need to do in order to move between locations.

Occasionally, NPCs with flashlights may show up. These NPCs are police, and they will only 'see' what their flashlights are pointed at. They also cannot see very far. They can, however, hear you if you make a noise.

Once you have been spotted by these NPCs, you cannot hide from them again

unless you manage to escape to a different basement.

{\it Example: Bob enters basement 36-M from 26-B and finds a line of tape on the floor. A sign on the wall says ``Connects to basement 36-B and 26-B. Walk heel-toe with both feet on the line at all times from one end of the line to the other to go to either basement.''} Bob goes to one end of the line and begins to walk on the line. While he is doing so, an NPC shows up with a flashlight. Bob decides to step

off the line and hide around a corner. The NPC walks up to the corner, and waves the flashlight slowly, but Bob remains silent and the light never touches Bob. The NPC leaves the basement. Bob needs to start walking from the beginning of the line and try to reach the end before the NPC returns in order to leave the basement undetected.}

%%\clearpage

\section{Dangerous Stakes}

\subsection{Health States}

Characters have four possible states concerning health and damage. When you are {\bf mobile}, you may act freely. When you are {\bf helpless}, you are immobile and may do nothing but talk. When you are {\bf knocked out}, you are unconscious and will regain consciousness in five minutes. When {\bf dead}, you are dead.

When knocked out, fall down and drop anything you are holding. Just lie there; you won't be doing much of anything until you wake up or die. Do not listen to conversations going on.

In addition to being mobile, helpless or knocked out, characters can also be {\bf wounded}. Wounded characters are bleeding and will die in five minutes, or in ten minutes if they have a cigarette. See {\em Cigarettes} below for more information. Wounded characters lose one hand of carry from their normal carrying capacity; if you are carrying up to your maximum capacity when someone wounds you without rendering you helpless, drop the items in one of your hands. If you are wounded, be appropriately dramatic. When you stop being wounded, you regain that hand of carry.

Dead men tell no tales. If you are dead, do not give out any information about your character or your death to any players. {\em Fill out your Death Report.} You may remain on the scene to play the part of your corpse; describe obvious information to onlookers ('I have a gunshot wound in my back'). When you leave, write a description of the body's visible state on the front of your name-badge. Take the 'I'm Not Here' side to wear. Stack your items with your body. Give your death report to a GM. If your death becomes generally known to the other characters, you may be able to become an observer. Until the game is over, you may not convey game information to any player.

\subsection{Cigarettes}

Cigarettes in this game are represented by candy cigarettes. They are in-game items. Unless you know otherwise, you begin game with one standard-sized pack of candy ciagarettes. If you have an in-game

cigarette in your mouth at any time while you are wounded, you take twice as long to bleed to death, i.e. you will take ten minutes rather than five minutes to die from a wound. If you have a cigarette in your mouth while being shot or if you have one placed in your mouth right before the five-minute time limit, you have an extra five minutes to bleed before dying. Additional cigarettes will not help you.

Note that if you are helpless, you may not draw a cigarette of your own while wounded; someone else needs to give you a cigarette if you did not already have one in your mouth while being wounded. You may not smoke if you are knocked out; if you did not have a cigarette while being simultaneously knocked out and wounded, you may very well bleed to death after five minutes.

#### \subsection{Weapons}

All weapons have both a physrep and an item card that declares it to be a weapon. Keep these together. Melee weapons may have combat bonuses indicated on the card. To use a weapon, you must hold it with a hand that is free of any other items; the hand and the weapon should not be obstructed in any way. Display it in an obvious manner. All weapons are one hand bulky. You cannot hold more than one weapon in a hand. You may only use one melee weapon at a time. Melee weapons are represented by foam boffers. Ranged weapons are represented by a dart gun, a disc gun or a koosh ring gun.

#### \subsection{Combat on stairs}

If either combatant is standing on stairs when combat breaks out, the combat immediately fails to produce any result. There should not be any combat on stairs, although it is perfectly acceptable to continue talking and interacting in-character while climbing stairs. Refrain from running, blocking movement or overtaking people on stairs. Try to stay about fifteen feet away from a stairwell exit if you are not using the stairs. Do not linger too long on stairs and ensure that you do not trouble NPs.

#### \subsection{Ranged Combat}

Ranged combat is real-time and mostly based upon player skill at firing and dodging physreps. Keep it safe. Hits to anywhere on the body have the same effect but do not aim for the head. If a projectile hits clothing or long hair such that it would not hit the body if it passed through the hair or clothing, it doesn't count. A hit on an item that you are holding counts as a hit on you, not the item. If there is a conflict over whether or not a projectile hit, the shooter calls the shot.

There are 2 types of ranged projectiles: **bullets** and **cartridges**. Bullets, represented by plastic discs, plastic darts or foam darts, can be fired by corresponding guns with the appropriate item cards. The cards indicate the maximum amount of ammunition that can be kept loaded in a specific gun at any time. Ammunition is limited; you may not reuse bullets that have been fired. Bullets that you find on the floor are spent bullet casings. All bullets have the same effect: if and when you are hit by one, you become wounded and helpless and will remain so until you know otherwise. Characters may purchase 7 bullets for \$5 at the beginning of the second day of game.

Shotgun cartridges, represented by koosh rings, can be fired by Vortex Tornado guns with the appropriate item card. If you are hit by a shotgun, you die immediately, whether you have a cigarette in your mouth or not.

### **Killing Blow and Strangulation**

A **Killing Blow** is a fatal series of wounds. A Killing Blow will kill a helpless or knocked out victim. Your victim must be within ZoC and either knocked out or helpless. You need to have a weapon to perform a Killing Blow. You must not be using a cigarette; if you have one in your mouth, be sure to remove it before performing a Killing Blow.

To perform a Killing Blow, clearly incant ``Killing Blow one, Killing Blow two, Killing Blow three, Killing Blow four, Killing Blow five'' at a reasonable pace. At each count, use the weapon in an appropriate manner; gently tap the victim with the foam boffer or shoot a bullet at the torso of the victim. You need to shoot a ranged weapon to use it in a Killing Blow; you cannot pummel someone to death with a gun. You do not have to be perfectly accurate; you simply need to expend five rounds of ammunition for a Killing Blow. Ammunition expended in a Killing Blow may not be used for any other purpose in game, such as shooting someone else. If you are using a fully-automatic ranged weapon for a Killing Blow, only fire at the last count and be sure to fire at least five rounds of ammunition.

If you're performing a killing blow with a gun and run out of ammunition or the gun jams, you can reload your gun (if you have extra ammunition) or fix your gun, and resume counting from where you left off. If you're in some sort of execution mob, you can get someone else to finish off the killing blow from where you left off. The count should resume at a reasonable pace.

To stop a Killing Blow, either attack the person doing it or say ``I stop you'' within ZoC. If you are attacked or if someone within ZoC says ``I stop you'' or an equivalent phrase while you are counting off

a Killing Blow, you are stopped and the victim is still alive. If you struck or shot the victim while counting, the victim is now wounded. An aborted Killing Blow does not give an already-wounded victim additional time to live.

You may use `{\bf Strangulation}` to kill a helpless or knocked out victim if you are unarmed. You must not be using a cigarette; if you have one in your mouth, be sure to remove it before Strangling somebody.

To Strangle a helpless or knocked out victim, place both of your hands on his or her shoulders and say ``I strangle you.''' You should not have anything else in your hands. You must remain stationary in that position for one whole minute and may not take any other action during that time; you should take the opportunity to roleplay and act. The victim may not make any noise or take any action during a Strangulation; if the victim was knocked out or restrained at the beginning of a Strangulation, the victim remains knocked out or restrained until death or until the Strangulation is aborted. To stop a Strangulation, use the same methods as stopping a Killing Blow.

#### `\subsection{Bombs}`

A bomb is represented by a bell, usually with some sort of timer. For this reason, please turn off watch alarms before entering game and avoid using them during game. If a bell rings near you, call a halt and examine the bell to confirm that it is a bomb. If it is and you were within arm's reach of a bomb when it rang, you are dead. A bomb will have a piece of string attached to it. If, when stretched out (even around corners), the string can touch you, you are wounded. Once the dead and wounded have been determined, game will resume. Anyone can arm a bomb; disarming a bomb requires an appropriate ability card.

#### `\subsection{Martial Combat}`

##### `%% intro`

All characters have a `{\bf Combat Rating}` (`{\bf CR}`) stat. This represents your basic skill in martial combat; you use the same number for attacking and defending. Someone with a CR of 1 can't fight very well. Someone with a CR of 3 is somewhat burly or skilled. When using this stat, you may pull your punches by using a lower number.

##### `%% offense`

Martial-attacking someone requires being within ZoC. Clearly state your attack followed by your CR (```\aKnockOut{} 2''` or ```\aWound{} 2''`). Your attack must resolve before you may make another. If an

ally directs `{\bf \aAssist{}}` at you after you attack, you may, within 2 seconds, restate your attack with the `\aAssist{}`'s CR added (```\aWound{ } 3''`, ```\aAssist{ } 2''`, ```\aWound{ } 5''`). `\aAssist{}` does not change your CR for defense. You may always ignore an `\aAssist{}`.

%% defense

When attacked, resolve by comparing the attack against your CR. If your CR is lower, take the effects; else, say ```{\bf resist}'` and the attack will have no effect. If you neither say ```resist'` nor counterattack within two seconds of the incant's end, you are surprised and the attack just works. The attack begins when the incant begins; until you resolve, all actions other than attacks are interrupted; a series of attacks cannot prevent simple actions (talking, weapon-drawing, ranged attacks) from happening between attacks. Resolve all attacks alone, in the order they occur; choose the order if it is unclear. If someone attacks with the word ```{\bf waylay}'` instead of a CR (```\aKnockOut{ } waylay''`), the attack just works.

`\paragraph{Martial Attack Abilities:}` Here is a list of attack abilities. Everyone has `\aKnockOut{}`, `\aWound{}`, `\aRestrained{}` and `\aAssist{}`. Certain characters may have `\aDisarm{}`.`\nopagebreak`

`\begin{group}`

`\MAP{Abil}{%`

`\setbox0\hbox{\phantom{w}{\em Effect}: \MYeffect}%`

`\par{\bf\MYname}: \MYtext\hfill\null\hskip\wd0\null%`

`\hskip-\wd0 plus1fill\box0%`

`\nopagebreak\par%`

`}`

`\aKnockOut{}`

`\aWound{}`

`\aAssist{}`

`\aRestrained{}`

`\aDisarm{}`

`\endgroup`

`\subsection{Stealth}`

Stealth abilities represent sneaking up on a victim with obvious intent to invade their personal space, probably to attack them by surprise. All the characters in game have the basic waylay ability as indicated below; some may have more dangerous variants.

To use a stealth ability, you must be within ZoC of your victim. Form the sign of the devil (index and pinky fingers extended, thumb holding other two fingers down) and extend it along the direct, unobstructed line from your shoulder to the victim's head. Hold this position for

the time specified by your ability. Your attempt at stealth will be thwarted if anyone attacks you or if the victim notices the symbol before this time is up. If they react in any way to the symbol, they have noticed; the attackers make the call.

If you notice someone using a stealth ability on you, make it obvious. ``I notice you'' is unambiguous; use it if you can. Once someone successfully uses the stealth ability on you, you may not retroactively have noticed.

`\paragraph{Waylay:}` You can stealthily attack someone. You must hold the waylay symbol for five seconds. If you succeed, you may replace your CR with ``waylay'' for a single immediate attack on your victim.

`\clearpage`  
`\section{The Need for Speed}`

`\subsection{Getting Around Chicago}`

Basements are not accessible unless you find a sign that permits you to enter a basement. When in a basement, you may not cross building boundaries or leave a basement unless you find a sign that permits you to do so.

Characters on foot can only move across building boundaries or leave a building on the first floor. Characters may move up or down a building freely. If your character is in a car, however, you may move freely between any non-basement location.

Cars in game are represented by dart guns. Your character may enter the driver's seat of a car by picking up a dart gun and carrying it in plain view. You may make engine noises if you wish. To start the car, move the dart gun six times around your waist. The character cannot leave the car or exchange positions with a passenger in the car without first stopping the car and its engine by placing the dart gun on the floor. You may only drive one car at a time. You may not bring extra dart guns into game; there are a fixed number of cars in the game.

There will be NPC cabbies in game with their own cars. The standard cab fare is `\$1` for crossing any building or floor intersection. Cabbies know the city pretty well, so if you are looking for a specific location, they can be very useful.

`\subsection{Passengers}`

Passengers can enter a car by standing still next to a car and saying ``I enter this car one, I enter this car two, I enter this car three''. Once the incant is complete, the passenger is in the car. Passengers should stay within ZoC of the driver whenever possible. A car may only hold three passengers at a time. Passengers and drivers exit a car by standing still next to a car and saying ``I leave this car one, I leave this car two, I leave this car three''.

#### \subsection{Drive-by Shootings}

Passengers and drivers in a car may perform melee attacks on each other, but persons outside of a car may not melee attack anybody inside that car. Passengers and drivers in the car can take up to two disc gun shots without any ill effects. The third shot knocks out and wounds the character like a regular bullet. Passengers may fire ranged weapons from cars. The driver may not fire ranged weapons from cars. If the driver is wounded, the car runs into a lamppost and is totalled. The passengers are unhurt but the car is now useless and offers no protection.

#### \subsection{Ramming}

Characters may carry as many darts as they wish. The darts are only useful for ramming other cars; they do not have any effect on pedestrians. To attempt to ram or sideswipe another car, plant your feet and fire the dart gun. If a driver or passenger of the other car is hit by a dart, the entire car must stop; it has been forced off the road. As long as you keep your feet planted, neither car can move. As soon as you move your feet, the other car can move after restarting the car. Passengers and drivers do not suffer ill effects from being rammed, although they are motionless until they leave the car or the car is restarted.

#### \section{Miscellaneous}

\paragraph{Badge Numbers:} The first digit of your badge number is your character's apparent age in decades. The second digit is your character's physical attractiveness. A ``1'' is Danny DeVito, a ``9'' is Marilyn Monroe. A ``5'' is your typical film noir protagonist. All characters in this game are automatically interested in flirting with any character of the opposite sex who has greater attractiveness; roleplay accordingly.

\paragraph{Rope:} Rope is freely available. Make an item card for it when you need it. To tie someone up, they must be either willing, helpless, or knocked out. Say ``I tie you up,''' then give the item card to your victim. If you get tied up with rope, you immediately

become helpless; hold the item card behind your back. If you are tied up but conscious and left alone, you can wriggle free in five minutes.

\paragraph{Game Times:} Players are expected to be present at the GM control room (24-110) by 7pm on Friday night and 7:30pm on Saturday night. Latecomers on the first night may find their characters reassigned to other players.

Game runs from 8pm to 2am on Friday night and 8pm to 2am on Saturday night. Players with cars are encouraged to offer rides to players who do not have personal transportation and live off campus. Surviving PCs are expected to be in game during all hours of game. Game may end early at the GMs' discretion. Cleanup and Wrapup will immediately follow the end of game. Breakfast may follow the end of Wrapup.

\paragraph{Game Areas:} Publicly-accessible areas within buildings 4, 12, 24, 34, 38, 36, 26, 16, 8, and the Infinite Corridor are all game areas. The standard patrol area is out-of-game for the second day. Elevators in these buildings are all accessible and useable. The streets in between these buildings are also game areas regardless of weather. Note that interesting or important locations in game may be outdoors. Please be mindful of traffic and prepare for inclement weather. Raincoats, hats and umbrellas are appropriate for the genre; please supply your own.

Try to stay within game areas for the whole duration of the game. The boundaries of game are elastic for the purposes of pursuit but players are encouraged to stay within the specified game areas for all situations. Do not attempt to cross Massachusetts Avenue, Vassar Street, Memorial Drive, Main Street or Ames Street during game. Other areas of campus may also be in-game but will only be accessible via clearly marked signs.

Avoid places where it would be illegal for you to go, such as areas under construction. Don't take game actions in labs, bathrooms, private offices, activity offices, and any place where not all players would be allowed to enter. Game action is not allowed in Athena clusters. Don't hide in them, either. You may not use Athena for in-game purposes.

\paragraph{Phones:}

You may use phones for out-of-game purposes whenever you wish. You may use phones for game purposes between 1pm and 2pm on Saturday. When doing so, callers are encouraged to speak in-character without spooking players or their roommates. Keep each call around five minutes (not including the time spent asking roommates to locate the intended recipient of the call) and engage in a maximum of three phone

calls. If you have already taken or made a total of three calls during the day, simply tell other game callers that your character has run out of calls for the day when they happen to call you. The aborted call does not count against the initiating caller's limit. Phone numbers are available from the Public Library in game.

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\section{Final Words}
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These rules are imperfect. The GMs may violate the letter of the rules in order to preserve the spirit of the game. We hope these rules are reasonably clear, but if you have any doubts about your interpretation, talk it over with us in advance.

We should also add, as much as we hate to admit it, we GMs are human: when all of our carefully laid plans are going haywire, we may lose our cool. Remember, the best way to deal with people is by remaining calm and friendly, especially when everyone is tired and hungry.

We hope you have lots of fun. Good luck.

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