



PROTOCOL
game series twenty



CREDITS

words and graphics by jim pinto

artwork by Felipe Gaona

proofing and assistance by James Glover and Martijn Tolsma

Le Carnival is Game 20 in the *Protocol* game series.

Inspired by GMZero.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 2

GETTING STARTED 3

MOTIVATIONS..... 5

RELATIONSHIPS..... 5

GAMEPLAY 6

SCENES

 OPENING SCENE 6

 VIGNETTES 6

 INTERROGATIONS 6

 INTERLUDES 7

 ENSEMBLES 7

SCENES 8

LOCATIONS..... 8

SPENDING DRAMA POINTS 9

OPTIONAL RULES 9

OVERVIEW 9

BACKGROUNDS..... 10

ADVANCED ROLES 10

NAMES 11

SCENES 12

CHARACTER SHEET..... 12

KICKSTARTER BACKERS..... 13

LE CARNIVAL

Le Carnival is a story roleplaying game about the human oddities (freaks) of a carnival during the Great Depression era. The Carnival travels the backroads of the Midwest farm belt and the Southern states, visiting towns far off the beaten trail. Characters are carnival freaks who hopelessly seek a degree of familiarity, clinging to the idea that somehow the Carnival is family. In fact, the “Brotherhood” of the Carnival is based only on who earns the most for the ringmaster, creating a twisted sense of meritocracy. The only true currency: fleecing the clueless rubes in the uneducated reaches of America.

Each game in the Protocol series is zero-prep for 3 or more players. The game length is exponentially long, so games with more players take more time to complete. The Protocol Series requires a deck of poker cards as well as tokens to track drama points.

This series presumes some understanding of GMless game protocol: scene-framing, shared authority, and so on. If you’ve never played a GMless game, try one of the GMZero games such as *Dying Memoryes*, or *George’s Children*. A free pdf of game advice — GMZero — is available for download at drivethrurpg.com.

INTRODUCTION

Le Carnival is the twentieth game utilizing the Protocol game mechanic. Light and quick, the system gives players everything they need to start playing immediately, doing away with over-explanation and getting right to the tools.

In Le Carnival, players take on the roles of directors outside the action and characters inside the action, using the ebb and flow of four different scene-framing styles to tell meaningful stories about characters in crisis. Specifically, they are human oddities in a carnival show, trying to gain favor with the ringmaster.

TERMS

Carnie life is complicated. One cannot simply envision it through the lens of television or folklore and understand it all. In researching this, I found myself overwhelmed with terms and cultural information. I recommend doing some research yourself online to know more.



GETTING STARTED

Each character is a sideshow “human oddity” in a traveling carnival. As the story goes on, the freaks find themselves in a tug-of-war with the other performers over who is the ringmaster’s favorite. True worth is measured in what money is brought into the show. The characters need names, roles, motivations, and relationships, as well as an understanding of the carnival. Once each player has completed the following steps, you are ready.

- Name your character
- Select one role for your character — this has no mechanical benefit
- Determine a character’s motivation by drawing a card
- Determine a relationship between two characters by drawing a card
- Determine elements about the game world

DECK SHUFFLING

A standard deck of cards is shuffled at the beginning of the game and again (only) if the deck runs out of cards. Used cards are discarded. Do not return Motivations or Relationships to the deck. The same goes for Scenes and Locations during play.

The use of jokers is optional.

DRAMA POINTS

Each player starts the game with one drama point and only gains additional points during interludes and interrogations. See page 5.

ROLES

Roles provide flavor and context, but no mechanical benefit.

- Bearded Lady. Does this need an explanation?
- Contortionist. Capable of bending into “impossible” poses, sometimes they had deformed limbs or no legs at all.
- Dwarf. At the time, the term *midget* was used.
- Elastic Skin Lady. Capable of pulling skin far away from the body.
- Geek. Someone who bites the heads off of live chickens and snakes.
- Giant. Obviously someone suffering from gigantism.
- Horned Man. Born with a protruding bone coming from his head.
- Human Oddity. Alligator man, elephant man, hunchback, and so on.
- The Human Torso. Someone devoid of arms and legs.
- Hunger Artist. That’s right. He would starve himself for people’s entertainment.
- Siamese Twins. Two players may choose to play this character.
- Strong Person. Traditionally this was a strong man or wrestler.
- Tattooed Person. Tattooed women were “odder” than men.

Note: There are so many different kinds of human oddities, they could not all be included in this document. I did my best to pick the ones people know. The advanced roles are nearly identical to this, but the carnie terms lists more.



MOTIVATIONS

Motivations are determined by drawing one random poker card from the deck for each character. The motivation descriptions are vague — specificity is your job. For instance, the ♠10 is a motivation of family, impulsively. The player may define this motivation as doing whatever it takes to protect her family.

A list of motivations is on page 5.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are determined by choosing (any) two characters and drawing one random poker card from the deck. The pair of characters share this relationship. The relationship descriptions are vague. Specificity is your job. For instance, the ♣10 is a relationship of burdensome trust. The players sharing this relationship may define it as an ongoing issue of trust between two brothers who have lied to each other since childhood.

A list of relationships is on page 5.

WORLD BUILDING

Each player selects one ingredient from the list below. If you are playing a 3-player game, then each player selects two. Now is a good time to determine the name of your carnival.

- Who among you doubles as the advance (setting up signs in the next town, alerting people that the carnival is coming)?
- Who do you owe money to? Where is the child you gave up?
- Where do you sleep? Do you have your own trailer?
- Who are you monogamous with? How long has this been going on?
- Where is the carnival now? What town is it headed to?
- Who among you still believes in god? Who among you holds services (though most carnies do not attend)?
- Who among you has sex for money? Who among you would never do that?
- Name two towns you aren't allowed to return to? Why?
- Name and describe the ringmaster? Who is his favorite? What does he prize above money?
- Describe how the depression has affected the last town you visited.

MOTIVATIONS

- SUIT**
- ♣ Desperately
 - ♦ Responsibly
 - ♥ Vehemently
 - ♠ Impulsively

- VALUE**
- A Discovery
 - 2 Freedom
 - 3 Pride
 - 4 Work
 - 5 Survival
 - 6 Wanderlust
 - 7 Fresh Start
 - 8 Hunger
 - 9 Distance/Time
 - 10 Family
 - J Retribution
 - Q Lust
 - K Respect
 - Joker

Draw two and combine the results



The “Ten-in-One” or Sideshow was ten sequential acts under one tent for one admission. This is where most freak shows took place, along with daredevil acts. Afterwards, the blowoff would be the “provocative” events that you had to pay extra to see. These were not for children and included grotesqueries.



RELATIONSHIPS

- SUIT**
- ♣ Burden
 - ♦ Complex
 - ♥ Fortune
 - ♠ Ominous

- VALUE**
- A Survival
 - 2 Abuse
 - 3 Loss/Reconciliation
 - 4 Codependent
 - 5 Reliable
 - 6 Generous
 - 7 Long-Term/Siblings
 - 8 Contemptuous
 - 9 Obsessive
 - 10 Trust
 - J Rivalry
 - Q Anxiety
 - K Outsiders
 - Joker

Draw again, adding another character to the Relationship



The blowoff is where freaks made their real money, never having to give a cut to house, unless they wanted to. Freaks often sold “pitch cards” (like trading cards). They had photos and biographical information printed on them.



GAME PLAY

While creating a story of their characters' lives in a depression-era traveling carnival, the players take turns directing scenes. Although this document provides the tools for framing the action, map-making and location naming are left to the players. A chart of scenes is on page 8.

Each turn the active player (director) draws two cards, which determine the scene type — vignette, interrogation, interlude, or ensemble — as well as the location. The scene's type (suit) and atmosphere (value) are determined by the first card, while the location is determined by the second card. *For instance, the director draws a ♦6 and a ♣7 indicating an interrogation (♦) about an accident at day (♣) front end.*

THE OPENING SCENE

The opening scene of the game is always a vignette at the closing of the previous show. The vignette focus is either Promotions or Movement/Transportation. Determine randomly which player narrates this vignette, but do not draw any cards. Afterwards, take turns until every player has directed four scenes.

VIGNETTES (CLUBS ♣)

Vignettes involve no actual dialog, merely setting the atmosphere for the story. The director determines the location from the card drawn and narrates a brief scene. A vignette shouldn't take more than a minute or two to narrate.

The director draws a ♣10 for scene — Vignette about Safety in Numbers — and a ♦Q — Night In Town. "After the carnival was driven out of town for grifting, some of us decided to make a trip back to Blythe to steal what we could from the locals in the dead of night. We brought as many people as we could, just in case something went wrong."

ADVICE

Keep your vignettes short and simple. Narrate enough information to set the tone, but don't overdo it by dragging the action on too long. Concise sentences are a writer's best friend.

INTERROGATIONS (DIAMONDS ♦)

Interrogations involve the director asking questions to one character. The director selects a player and steals one drama point from him. Then the director asks five questions — in or out of character — which must be answered by that player in character.

If the interrogation is in character, the director may ask the questions from the point of view of an NPC or his own character. This process should feel organic. If the interrogation is out of character, the director asks the questions in an abstract fashion, as though going down a list. The questions can be anything fitting the theme.

The director draws a ♦4 for scene — Interrogation about Promotions — and a ♠7 — Behind the Curtain Front End. The director decides that the ringmaster wants to see if Kessler has what it takes to do promotions for the carnival. The ringmaster approaches Kessler behind the ticket booth, with some subtle questions, feeling him out, and generally seeing if Kessler can be trusted.

ADVICE

Ask leading questions. Avoid yes/no questions, or questions that can be reduced to short answers. What and why questions are great. Did or can questions are not. "Why are you waiting for reinforcements?"

NPCs

The director may add one NPC to an interlude or interrogation, but the characters remain the focus of the scene. Vignettes do not have dialogue, but any number of NPCs may color the story background. Ensembles may have NPCs, but they are controlled/run by the director. Other players may introduce NPCs by spending one drama point.

In Le Carnival, scenes are about the desperation of the era and the extents people will go to in order to eat. When you are the director, make the most of your scenes by having the human oddities play against people just as desperate as they are.



INTERLUDES (HEARTS ♥)

Interludes involve two (and only two) characters with a pre-existing relationship. Neither of these characters needs to be the director's character. The director determines the location and sets the scene based on the cards drawn. The scene runs as long as the director likes, without being self-indulgent, calling "scene" when the characters have said or done enough. An interlude involves only one location. Should the characters leave the location, the scene ends.

All players **not** involved in the scene gain one drama point at the end of the interlude.

The director has drawn the ♥5 for scene — Interlude about a Challenge — and the ♣8 for location — a Day Peepshow. The director decides that Kessler and Roman must watch the back of the Peepshow tent to make sure no one is trying to get a free peek in the middle of the day. The pair have a history of one-upmanship and they have turned the job into a contest of who can wrangle the most freeloaders.

ADVICE

Interludes are mostly about the drama between two characters. While the interlude can be used to advance the plot, this is secondary to the interpersonal actions and reactions of the characters. An alternative example of the scene above could be the pair "barking," and trying to see who can bring the most marks into the peepshow tent.

RESOLVING CONFLICT

In the Protocol Game Series, whenever two or more characters reach a moment of unresolvable conflict one of the following things happens:

- In an interlude, the director decides who wins the conflict, narrates the conclusion, and ends the scene.
- In an ensemble, the scene ends, which leaves the conflict dangling.
- Should the players wish to override any of these rules, they must spend one drama point, or in the case of a tie, more drama points than anyone else. The winner narrates the conclusion.
- Should a scene end unresolved, this creates a cliffhanger effect. Players may wish to resolve this in the following scene. But this isn't always necessary. Use your best judgement. Sometimes the best things are left unsaid.

Vignettes and interrogations have no conflict.

ENSEMBLES (SPADES ♠)

Ensembles involve all of the characters. Like an interlude, the director determines the plot of the scene, as well as the location. The director may preempt the scene as much as he likes, but once the ensemble starts, the players should let things develop organically. The director still has the right to call "scene" at any moment, but any player may override the director by spending one drama point to end a scene early, or to extend a scene longer.

The director has drawn the ♠3 for scene — Ensemble about Marks — and the ♥6 for location — Aftershow/Blowoff Concessions. The director decides the group is gathering after the carnival has shut down for the night to talk about how easy the marks were this evening. This is a perfect time for everyone to figure out a pecking order amongst themselves as they calculate who is holding the most coin and therefore can pay out the most to the ringmaster.

ADVICE

Ensembles involve everyone and should be allowed to run their course. But not too long. Eventually the characters will start spewing every kind of theory and idea, which slows play and distracts from the story.

Let everyone get a say, but once you resolve the scene's primary focus, it's time to end things. Don't forget, if there's conflict, the scene ends on its own, unless someone spends one Drama Point.

THE JUMP

Players take turns directing scenes. The order is not important. Players may decide to take turns in a random order, clockwise order, or even bid to be the next director. Just make sure everyone is involved and no one directs two times in a row.

The players may also decide to have the game end only after all of the face cards have been revealed (during character creation and game play) for a longer game, or all the aces are revealed for a shorter game.

Once the characters finish their final show, each player narrates his character's involvement in tearing down the tent and moving on. For each drama point a player still possesses, he narrates (in turn) a vignette about "the jump." Once everyone has spent their drama points, each player determines if his character lives, dies, leaves the carnival, moves on, or is otherwise changed by the encounter. Players may also determine who is the ringmaster's new favorite.



SCENES

SUIT

- ♣ Vignette
- ♦ Interrogation
- ♥ Interlude
- ♠ Ensemble

VALUE

- A Status
- 2 Carnival Justice
- 3 Marks
- 4 Promotions
- 5 A Challenge
- 6 Accident
- 7 Illness/Injury
- 8 Set-Up/Tear Down
- 9 Movement/Transportation
- 10 Safety in Numbers
- J Chaos
- Q Internal Conflict
- K External Conflict
- Joker
- Monologue

MONOLOGUE

Monologues are (optional) solo scenes where the director's character (or an NPC) delivers a single speech that cannot be interrupted. The director decides who else is at the location. The director gains one drama point.

LOCATIONS

SUIT

- ♣ Day
- ♦ Night
- ♥ Aftershow/Blowoff
- ♠ Behind the Curtain

VALUE

- A Annex
- 2 Back End
- 3 Back Yard
- 4 Games of "Skill"
- 5 Personal Trailer
- 6 Concessions
- 7 Front End
- 8 Peep Show
- 9 The Trucks
- 10 Midway
- J Farms
- Q In Town
- K Ringmaster's Trailer
- Joker
- Big Tent

The back end of the carnival is the far end of the lot. Large shows and rides are located at the back end. This attracts marks to walk the entire lot and circulate. Regardless of where they are located, concessions are part of the front end.



DRAMA POINTS

Drama points are used to control the narration and finale. In addition, players may use drama points in the follow ways.

- The director may **spend one drama point** to discard a scene/ location card and draw a new one.
- During an interrogation, the player being interrogated may **spend one drama point** to avoid answering one question.
- If a scene ends with unresolved conflict, any player may **spend one drama point** to shift the conflict to an NPC who has already made an appearance in the story, or **spend two drama points** to shift the conflict to a new NPC.

OPTIONAL RULES

- If the same suit is drawn three times in a row for a scene or location, discard the card and draw a new one until a new suit appears.
- At the beginning of the game, shuffle the deck and remove 10 cards at random. Do not look at them. Remove them from play and never shuffle them back into the deck.
- Should a player ever run out of drama points, the director may give him one of his, regardless of the scene type.
- On page 10 is a list of advanced roles and backgrounds. Neither is necessary to play the game, but each adds additional color and flavor. No character has more than one. When using backgrounds, these are selected before roles. When using advanced roles, these replace standard roles.
- Once per game, the players may decide to **award one drama point** to a director who has framed a particularly good scene.
- Select a permanent director who does not play a character, but instead runs the game like a traditional RPG. Cards are still drawn for scenes. The game lasts for a number of scenes equal to four times the number of players, or as long as the director chooses.

OVERVIEW

CREATE CHARACTERS

- Shuffle a deck of poker cards
- Name characters
- Determine backgrounds (optional)
- Select roles
- Determine motivations
- Determine relationships
- Give each player one drama point

OPENING SCENE

- Vignette (Promotions or Movement/Transportation)

SCENES

- Take turns directing scenes
- Draw two cards: one scene type, one location
- Gain drama points during interrogations and other players' interludes

THE JUMP

- Take turns narrating vignettes about the tear down

END GAME

- Who lives? Who dies? Who leaves the carnival? Who moves on? Who is otherwise changed by the encounter? Who is the ringmaster's new favorite?

BACKGROUNDS

- SUIT**
- ♣ Outcast/Convict
 - ♦ Working Class
 - ♥ Runaway
 - ♠ Deformed
- VALUE**
- A Addict
 - 2 Abused
 - 3 Orphan
 - 4 Overshadowed
 - 5 Large Family
 - 6 Jilted/Scorned
 - 7 Well-Known
 - 8 Sycophant/Bully
 - 9 Regarded/Respected
 - 10 Talented
 - J Strong-Arm
 - Q Nepotism
 - K Spoiled
 - Joker
 - Chosen One



The back yard or living lot is away from public access and used for private trailers.

A bunkhouse is a trailer split into two beds for workers who cannot afford a room or their own trailer.



ADVANCED ROLES

- SUIT**
- ♣ Roughie
 - ♦ Green
 - ♥ Advance
 - ♠ Favorite
- VALUE**
- A Bearded Lady
 - 2 Contortionist
 - 3 Dwarf
 - 4 Elastic Skin Lady
 - 5 Geek
 - 6 Giant
 - 7 Horned Man
 - 8 Human Oddity
 - 9 The Human Torso
 - 10 Hunger Artist
 - J Siamese Twins
 - Q Strong Person
 - K Tattooed Person
 - Joker
 - Elephant Man



The advance plans and marks the routes to shows.

Roughies are carnies assigned to handle numerous tasks.

Carnies prefer the term showman.





CHARACTER NAMES

Amos	Arthur
Athena	Bailey
Big Bob	Brody
Carol	Chaw
Chloe	Clark
Clyde	Constance
Curly	Devona
Dixie	Dora
Duffy	Dutch
Eleanor	Ellis
Eugene	Felix
Finn	Florance
Frankie	French
Freya	Gertrude
Guy	Hank
Hector	Hollace
Jasper	Jeremiah
Jonesy	Lambert
Lang	Lou
Luke	Ma
Mady Ray	Mallory
Naomi	Nell
Ophelia	Oscar
Pauli	Penelope
Robin Marks	Roscoe
Rosie	Samson
Scutter	Slim
Stella	Stu
Tiny	Trent
Trixie	Ulysses
Verona	Wallace

CARNIE TERMS

Agent. One who works a game, usually a rigged one.

Alligator Man. Human oddity afflicted with a skin condition.

Ballyhoo. The complicated spiel that equates to carnival advertising.

Beledi dancers. Original term for belly dancers.

Beano. Carnival predecessor to Bingo!

Big Eli or Eli. Ferris wheel.

Blade Box. Complicated blowoff show that would trick men into giving money to see what they believed would be a naked woman.

Blade Glommer. Sword swallower.

Circassian Girl. Tattooed girl with an exotic look.

Crime Show. Midway attraction of famous criminal memorabilia.

Dime Museum. A lurid and sensational collection of curiosities, freaks, and monstrosities exhibited for a low admission price.

Ding Show. A “free show” that requires a “contribution” to view.

Drop Counter Box. A rigged ticket box where a mark’s change drops.

Dukkering. Gypsy fortune-telling.

Fakir. A performer with a “lifelong study of mysticism and/or yoga.” He lies on a bed of nails, swallows swords, eats fire, etc.

Fireball Show. A disreputable carnival, full of cheats.

Ham and Bacon Wheel. Wheel of fortune where the prize is groceries.

High Grass. An extremely rural area.

Lobster Man. Human oddity with lobster claw-like hands.

Midway. Everything between the ticket booth and the main tent.

Monkey Girl or Boy. Human oddity afflicted with hirsutism.

Nautch Show. A raunchy girl show.

Pickled Punks. Human fetuses preserved in jars and displaying anatomical abnormalities.

Pinhead. Human oddity afflicted with microcephaly.

Popeye. Human oddity who can pop his eyeballs out.

Professor. Showman who plays an “expert” in acts or exhibits.

Tattooed Man/Woman. Each tattoo must have a story for the marks.

Wunderkammer. Chamber of Wonders.

SCENES

VIGNETTES (CLUBS ♣)

Vignettes involve no actual dialog, merely setting the atmosphere for the story. The director determines the location from the card drawn and narrates a brief scene. A vignette shouldn't take more than a minute or two to narrate.

INTERROGATIONS (DIAMONDS ♦)

Interrogations involve the director asking questions to one character. The director selects a player and steals one drama point from him. Then the director asks five questions — in or out of character — which must be answered by that player in character.

If the interrogation is in character, the director may ask the questions from the point of view of an NPC or his own character. This process should feel organic. If the interrogation is out of character, the director asks the questions in an abstract fashion, as though going down a list. The questions can be anything fitting the theme.

INTERLUDES (HEARTS ♥)

Interludes involve two (and only two) characters with a pre-existing relationship. Neither of these characters needs to be the director's character. The director determines the location and sets the scene based on the cards drawn. The scene runs as long as the director likes, without being self-indulgent, calling "scene" when the characters have said or done enough. An interlude involves only one location. Should the characters leave the location, the scene ends.

All players **not** involved in the scene gain one drama point at the end of the interlude.

ENSEMBLES (SPADES ♠)

Ensembles involve all of the characters. Like an interlude, the director determines the plot of the scene, as well as the location. The director may preempt the scene as much as he likes, but once the ensemble starts, the players should let things develop organically. The director still has the right to call "scene" at any moment, but any player may override the director by spending one drama point to end a scene early, or to extend a scene longer.

NAME/ROLE

BACKGROUND

MOTIVATION

RELATIONSHIP

NOTES

SCENES

DRAMA POINTS

Spend one to end or extend an ensemble

Spend one to resolve conflict

Spend one to shift the conflict to an existing NPC

Spend two to shift the conflict to a new NPC

Spend one (during an Interrogation) to avoid answering a question

Spend during final narration

LE CARNIVAL
CHARACTER SHEET

HELPER MONKEY

Diana Kwoikoski Stoll

REGULAR BACKERS

Catherine

Dale Murchie

Daniel Boles

Ed Pegg

Fernando

Hana Kucharova

James Wood

José Luis Porfirio

Julian G Hicks

Keith Brake

Stras Acimovic

IRREGULAR SUPPORTERS

Alejandro Albert Garcia

Alex W

anderland

Andrew Wells

Ben Woerner

Benjamin Tham

Bernard Gravel

Black-Thing

BlackWyrn Publishing

Brett Easterbrook

C P

Caoimhe Ora Snow

Charley Brandum

Chris Carlson

Chris Schoenthal

Chris Shorb

Christian Nord

Clayton Falconpunch

Daniel C

David Margowsky

David McGuire

David Terhune

Derek Guder

Descendingform

Diana Stoll

DivNull Productions

Ed Possing

Felix Girke

FelTK

Filthy Monkey

flashbytes

George Panopoulos

George VanMeter

George Vasilakos

Glazius

Glen Conolly

Greg Chapin

Happion Laboratories

irriion

Jack Gulick

Jake McGrath

James Glover

James Stuart

Johan Kristian Milde

John A W Phillips

John Diffley

Judd M. Goswick

Kairam Ahmed Hamdan

Ketwyld

Khyron

Lars Erik Larsen

Laura Scott

Leslie Weatherstone

Lin Liren

Malk

Marc Majcher

Marcus Johnson

Mark Kilfoil

Mark Nau

Martijn Tolsma

Martin Blake

Michael Bergh Hansen

Michael Leader

Michael McNeal

Michael Wight

Morten Berg

Natalya Alyssa Faden

Nate Miller

Nathan Hillen

Nathan Lax

Nathanael Cole

Nathaniel Brengle

Nils Kullberg

Owlglass

Pablo Martinez

Paco Garcia Jaen

Pete

Philip Espi

Philip Reed

Richard Carter

Robert Carnel

Robert Mull

Robert Posada

Ross Isaacs

Ruth Phillips

Sophia Brandt

Scott Jamieson

Sean Cameron Crane

sehmerus

Seth Harris

Seth Johnson

Shane Hensley

Solid Art Labs

Stephen Kilpatrick

Steve Bean

Steve Dulson

Steven Lord

Steven Watkins

Stew Wilson

Svend Andersen

T. Anthony Moore

Teppo Pennanen

Tijn Rams

Tim Clouse

Timothy Hidalgo

Tobie Abad

Tom Pleasant

Tomer Gurantz

Trevor Smith

Tristan Zimmerman

Vic Smith

Volker Jacobsen



PROTOCOL
game series