

Ensemble

Welcome to **Ensemble**, the impromptu storytelling game.

In **Ensemble**, the participants collaboratively improvise a story of their own making. Each player looks after one of the story's primary characters, and shares the responsibility to tend to the other characters in the game. Meanwhile, the responsibility for setting the scene is passed around like a hot potato, sending the 'spotlight' whirling around in its wake.

Ensemble creates an organized chaos as it shifts from scene to scene, character to character, theme to theme. Players will sometimes be taken by surprise as to which characters are going to be in the next scene, and who gets to create the situation they'll have to face. The stories created by **Ensemble** might look like a favorite television show, or a series of books, or maybe even a play – but whatever form they take, they are about the people and their struggles with the world.

What You Need

Ensemble is a game intended for 3-6 people, although it can be played with two if necessary. The same players do not need to be present every time it is played.

To play **Ensemble**, a group needs exactly three six-sided dice per player, plus one additional. These are called *blocks*, and are central to the ebb and flow of the game. Also there should be a handful of four-sided dice (called Trait dice), and enough eight-sided dice (called Spotlight dice) to have one for each player. Counters – poker chips, coins, or beads – are always nice to have, though not strictly necessary.

Finally, make sure everyone has some paper and pencils, to keep track of character data. **Ensemble** characters don't require a lot of room, making index cards the ideal size for record keeping. The final version of **Ensemble** will also provides record sheets that can be printed either onto perforated index card sheets, or onto plain paper.

Getting Started

When starting a completely new story of **Ensemble**, the players should spend some time deciding what sorts of stories they want to tell. This should be a collaborative effort – in **Ensemble**, everyone takes their turn framing scenes and creating supporting characters, so having everyone on the same page is a big help.

A good way to begin is to figure out a central premise – something no more than one or two sentences long, giving some idea of what the main characters of the story might be. Are the players playing a respected family of suburbanite Satanists? Perhaps the group prefers a detective agency in a science-fiction setting? Maybe they're all political movers and shakers in a fantastic medieval city-state? Or, possibly, victims of genetic tampering, now manifesting comic-book super abilities?

Whatever it is the players decide to do, make sure everyone has a chance to speak. If the story is going to be about science fiction detectives, maybe someone has a particular opinion about space travel, or clones, or cybernetics. If the story is set in medieval times, maybe someone's worried about the level of magic and mysticism that might be used.

*Allison, Bill, Charles and Darren have gathered together to play a game of **Ensemble**.*

"So Bill," Allison says, "you've read the rules. How do we start?"

"Well, first we need some idea of what we're going to be doing," Bill says. "Some sort of theme or premise. Think of television shows, or movies, or books - what sort of story do you guys want to tell?" Everyone looks at each other for a moment. "Oh, come on," Bill continues after a moment, "don't tell me none of you have any ideas??"

"I've always wanted to play a game set in the ice age," Allison says.

Charles is already rolling his eyes. "Oh, come on. What sort of fun would that be? Cavemen hunting mammoths?"

"I don't know," says Allison, "Maybe it could be fun. Besides, do you have an idea?"

"Something a bit more approachable. I haven't done a fantasy game in a while - maybe something like that? Dragons, magic, the whole nine yards?"

"Maybe we can combine the two," says Bill. "Tweak with history a little bit, and you've got humans running around with dinosaurs, those are almost like dragons. And who knows, maybe primitive man did use magic - maybe it just was all used up before we got here."

"Hmm," Darren muses, warming to the idea. "Magic like oil - a non-renewable resource. I like it! And with magic, you can even make dinosaurs breathe fire, or whatever you want."

Bill goes, "A fire-breathing T-rex? That's even cooler than a dragon!"

"I can live with that," Allison agrees.

"I'm still not sold," Charles says. "It's still got less civilization than I really want."

Bill goes, "I know, what if there's, like, Atlantis, right? We could be set near a coast, and the Atlantis people could occasionally visit."

Charles seems interested in this idea. "Sure, I'll play someone from Atlantis."

"Why would an Atlantis guy be living with a bunch of cave-men?" Darren asks. "I know! Maybe Atlantis is sinking... you're one of the people that's escaped. So used to your Atlantis civilization, you almost didn't make it through the first winter... maybe you're the only one left from your group of refugees, killed by the cold, saved by us cavemen. Maybe we'll have to deal with other escaping Atlantis folk trying to set up shop in the new world."

"That's cool," Allison says. "Chuck?"

"I can live with that, I guess." Charles says.

"Great! Let's start making characters," Bill says.

Characters

Once everyone's on the same page with the story's premise, it's time to start creating characters. Characters in **Ensemble** are composed of two types of descriptors: Traits and Themes.

Traits are the trademarks of a given character, aspects that distinguish them and give them a purpose in the story. They can influence the outcome of a conflict, and are used to shape the story. Traits should be conceived in broad strokes, with some story behind them. A *prodigy*, for instance, is likely to have a different approach to problem solving than a *scholar*, even if they command the same knowledge. Feel free to create traits that describe relationships to other people, or to places – a matriarch might take her family as a trait, while a park ranger might take the forests he's charged to protect. Feel free to take direct personality traits as well.

"Bill," Darren says, "these are index cards."

"I know," Bill says. "Characters in **Ensemble** don't take up a lot of space, so that's all we'll really need. Now, at the start of the game, we're going to need to each make four characters..."

"Four?!" Charles groans.

"If they don't take up a lot of space," Allison says, "and we need to make so many, they shouldn't be that hard to make."

"No," Bill says, "they're not. First, everyone makes a Protagonist. That'll be your main character, nobody else can play him but you. They get four Traits, which are like short descriptions about who they are, or people or places they care about. When they show up in the story, they let you roll an extra die, which might mean the difference between success and failure."

Charles pipes up first. "Well, everyone knows who I'm making - one of the last scholarly magicians of Atlantis. Darren's idea is growing on me - he has no skills, no idea how to survive in the real world. I think that gives me at least three traits - Atlantean, scholar, and magician. Now for a fourth. Hmm..."

"Nice start! I think I'm going to make your opposite." Allison starts writing. "She's the tribe's medicine woman, a student of natural magic. No, let's make her the medicine woman's protégée, instead, that way she can still be young. I'll give her 'shaman' as a trait, and 'young' as another, since I figure her youth will get her into trouble."

"That's two so far, Allison," Bill says. "I've got a character using 'young' myself. His other traits so far are 'curious' and 'inventor.' He's the stereotypical gadget guy, with the stone aged twist of course. I think people are just going to call him 'Wheel.' He's got a good reason to pester Darren's magician, since Atlantis's civilization probably has lost more than poor Wheel has ever learned."

Darren is chuckling. "Wow, good thing you guys have me around. A reckless inventor, a bookish scholar, and a young medicine woman. Me, I'm the chief's son - hey, there's a good trait. Add that to 'warrior' for two traits so far."

"Reckless!" Bill writes that down as Darren groans. "That's my fourth trait. Wait, I think I'm going to change out 'young' for 'medicine woman's son'."

"Oh, very nice, Bill! I'm going to write down 'herbalist' for Wren's third trait," Allison says, "and 'perky' for the last. She's always cheerful."

"That's Wren and Wheel so far for character names. Might as well stick with the theme of 'W', I'm going to call my character Wolf, and I'll even take 'wolf' as a trait to signify a pet wolf that's always beside me."

"Shouldn't you make that as another character?" Charles asks. "Oh, and my final trait is 'proud'."

"He doesn't have to make the wolf a separate character," Bill says, "especially if it's just a bit of color."

Darren grins. "Yeah, and this way, I'm the only one who gets to play it! And to finish out the quartet, I'll make Wolf 'athletic'."

Allison nudges Charles. "What are you going to name your wizard?"

Bill laughs. "You should make it a 'w' name too!"

"No," Charles says, "I'll leave the W names to the cavemen. I'll just take a single U. How about Uriel?"

Darren nods. "Very nice."

Themes, on the other hand, are an umbrella term for any sort of recurring element that can be used to spark conflict and interest in a story. Themes can be questions that need answering, problems that need solving, or simply continuing themes that define certain characters or setting. If you can't imagine and articulate a few different types of conflicts that a given theme might instigate or illustrate, and imagine how many different characters might be involved in it, it's probably best not to use it.

Traits might sometimes be duplicated between characters – it wouldn't be out of line in some stories to have two prodigies, or fourteen wizards, and so on. More often, however, characters will (and should) share themes, as sharing a theme is beneficial. Themes are the tool used to spark conflict and interest in a story –and when they do, every character with that theme gets rewarded. Since most conflicts have multiple participants, sharing a theme means sharing in the rewards (and multiplying one's investment). Characters may never have more themes than they have traits.

"One last thing guys," Bill says. "You're going to want to pick a Theme for each of you."

"Theme?" Charles muses. "Like the fall of Atlantis?"

"Yeah, that works! We each need a separate theme. It works best if it's something others can share in. Mine will be Discovery."

"Oooh," says Allison. "That's nice! I wonder what will work for my medicine woman..."

"I don't know," Darren says, "but, as a warrior and the son of the chief, I think mine is simple – Duty."

"Very nice, Darren," Bill says.

"Here's one for Wren. Omens."

"That's really nice, Allison," Charles says. "I'm going to move away from the fall of Atlantis, I think, and pick Survival."

"Stick with the fall of Atlantis," says Bill. "I've got an idea how we can use Survival."

Every player is expected to make four characters before joining a story of **Ensemble** – their *protagonist* (with one unique theme), a *major character* sharing their protagonist's starting theme, and two *supporting characters* for their protagonist (neither of whom start with a theme).

Character Hierarchy

Protagonists are the top of the line characters in **Ensemble** – the central focus of the story and, in theory, the characters whose stories we want to follow. Everything happens from their viewpoints; every scene has at least one of them. Everyone playing in a game of **Ensemble** gets exactly one protagonist, which only they're allowed to play. There will be times when players *must* play their protagonist, but a lot of the time, they'll be able to play a wide variety of characters. And sometimes, they'll be unable to play their protagonist.

Just below protagonists we have the *major characters*. Second from the top of the totem pole, major characters are almost the equals in story presence as the protagonists. They are a wide and varied group, including former protagonists, recurring villains, 'guest star' type roles, and everything in between. Major characters have their own goals and motives, and so often find themselves in opposition to one or more of the protagonists, though they may be just as likely to ally with them. Major characters are available for anyone to play, under the right circumstances.

"Bill," Allison says, "you said we each had to make four characters, right? Which one's next?"

"You've got to make a major character, connected to your character's theme. Major characters get only three traits, and can be played by anyone. It could be an enemy, a mentor, a lover, pretty much anyone you can imagine. These guys are some of the most powerful characters in the game, besides the protagonists, in terms of pure story-power."

"Hmmm," says Darren. "I think mine's pretty obvious – the chief. That's pretty strongly connected to Duty."

"That makes mine obvious too, I guess," says Allison. "The medicine woman."

"Doesn't have to be," says Bill. "Depends on how important you want to make her."

"Oh, she should be pretty important," says Allison. "How about you, Mr. Wizard?"

"Huh?" Charles says. "Get back to me, I'm thinking."

"Well," says Bill, "you guys are getting all touchy-feely with yours. I think we need a solid villain."

"I can supply that!" says Charles. "How about an exiled Atlantis wizard, from before the sinking started, living out in the wilderness in one of those old-style wizard's keeps?"

Bill grins. "Perfect!"

Allison nudges Bill. "So how about you?"

"I'm going to pick the Chief's daughter, I think. I'm smitten in love with her. You okay with that, Darren?"

"Sure, I'm happy to have a sister! You better treat her right though, or I'll beat you up."

Allison rolls her eyes. "Men!"

"How does that tie in with Discovery?" Charles asks.

"Crap, you're right. Okay, I'll keep that concept in the back of my head. I'm going to change Discovery to Adventure! (I was thinking about doing that anyway) and do something else instead." He starts scribbling on an index card. "We need a fire-breathing T-Rex, after all."

Darren is laughing. "Can't argue that that's adventurous."

"Traits, guys? The T-Rex has 'T-Rex', 'fire-breathing' and 'one eye.' That last one is why he's specifically connected to me. Dang invention was supposed to kill him, not just maim him."

"Well, the Chief is pretty simple. He's got 'Chief', 'virile', and 'seen it all.' He's an old, wise man but it hasn't stopped him yet."

“The medicine woman is similar: ‘medicine woman’ ‘wise’ and ‘the tribe’. She’s the real caretaker of the tribe, the Chief’s the protector.”

“Well, the opposing wizard has ‘exile’ ‘wizard’ and ‘keep.’” Charles says. “I figure he’s most powerful when he’s at home.”

Next in line are *supporting characters*, standing in the center of the hierarchy. These characters are directly connected to the major characters – the protagonists and major characters are their anchors, their reasons for being in the story. The primary purpose of supporting characters is to bring the issues of the major characters into relief by emphasizing or contrasting them. They can be friends, rivals, family, victims, lovers, servants, phenomena – or anything else imaginable – and need not even be aware of each other when first connected.

Protagonists always have exactly two supporting characters, called *foils* – one written down on each side of their character sheet. Major characters may anchor any number of supporting characters (although they start with none). Players may never play the foils of their own protagonist, and are otherwise restricted in playing supporting characters by their seating arrangements.

“Perfect! Now you guys need to make two foils each. These are supporting characters specifically connected to your character. I’ll make the chief’s daughter idea that I had earlier, one of my foils.”

“Let me guess,” says Allison, “they get two traits?”

“Yep! Each, even. The chief’s daughter gets ‘beautiful’ and ‘tomboy.’ Oh, and I think I’m going to be the son of the medicine woman.”

Charles is counting. “Man, that’s 11 traits total, before the game even starts.”

“It’s not that bad,” says Darren. “I’m going to have a rival warrior from a nearby tribe, and then his sister, who’s my new wife. That’s an easy four traits: ‘chief’s son’ and ‘warrior’ for him, and for her, ‘newlywed’ and ‘chief’s daughter.’ I figure both of them are really wrapped up in social position.”

“It might be easy for you. My poor scholar doesn’t really know anyone!”

“That’s what you get for playing an outsider,” Allison says, sticking her tongue out at Charles. “I think I’m going to do the whole forbidden relationship thing. One of my foils is the apprentice, maybe the son, of the wizard of the keep. He’ll have ‘apprentice’ and ‘smitten.’ We’ve been meeting secretly in the forest for a while.” Everyone nods – they think this is a great idea.

Charles speaks up. “I think one of my foils will be the tribesman that saved me. He’s a hunter, probably one of the older ones. I’ll just give him ‘warrior’ and ‘hunter.’ He’s the guy that I ‘owe’ for saving my life. And just to throw a bit of magic in there, the other character is a magic golem. I’ll give him ‘ancient’ and ‘golem.’ I figure he’s from an older time, has seen a lot, and the tribe just sort of kept him around as an idol or something. When I was saved, I re-activated him, so he owes me HIS life.”

“Very nice, Charles,” says Bill. “I like the idea of this nearby tribe. I’m going to give them a Librarian for my other foil. He’s got a ratty collection of Atlantis texts collected and traded for over the years. Wheel pores over them for new ideas, and idolizes the guy. I’ll give him ‘venerable’ and ‘librarian.’ So their village is probably only a few hours away.”

“And last but not least, Wren has a twin sister, Robin.” Allison says. “Unlike her sister, who’s got the shaman gift, Robin went the more traditional route. She’s married, to someone in that nearby tribe, and already has kids. I’m going to give her ‘mother’ and ‘twin.’”

“Hey,” says Darren. “Why not make her married to Charles’s brother in law, the mighty warrior?”

“I like that,” Allison and Charles say together. She sticks her tongue out at him.

Near the bottom of the hierarchy are the *minor characters*. Often recurring, minor characters use places, concepts or sometimes even other characters as anchors, and may not appear in a scene without either their anchor, or one of their themes. For instance, a minor character that’s a restaurant critic will usually only show up when a scene is set in a restaurant; a wife may only ever show up with her husband; a librarian might only show up in the library. There is quite an overlap between minor characters and supporting characters – former supporting characters often become minor characters, and minor characters are the most likely choice to become new supporting characters. Minor characters may be played by anyone, even if they’re currently playing other characters.

Finally, there are extras, which are hardly characters at all. Extras are those incidental characters that rarely last for more than one scene – the faces in the crowd. They are a good vehicle to give stories more color and flavor, and are the breeding ground for all character types higher on the food chain. Once a character graduates from an extra to a higher caste, they may never become an extra again. Extras never count as 'playing a character' – a player can play as many extras without violating any restrictions on what other types of characters they can play.

A character's place in the hierarchy restricts the number of traits they may have. Extras never have any traits. Minor characters always have exactly one, supporting characters exactly two, major characters exactly three, and protagonists exactly four. Characters may never have more themes than they have traits, but may have less (or even none).

Themes and Beats

At the start of the first game of the story, every protagonist has one theme, which they share with a single major character. In addition, each story has one *core theme*, in which every protagonist must be invested. This is the central theme of the whole story, the only theme guaranteed to show up every time a group sits down to play the game, and should color the entire experience. Even with the same setup, stories with different core themes have a different focus and tone.

The investment of each theme is measured cumulatively – each character invested in a theme doesn't need to worry about recording the value, but they should all be tracked separately on a separate card. The measure of investment is the 'beat,' a token that can be used to activate Traits for extra dice, and to create characters to use in other scenes. At the start of the story, every theme begins with two beats, except the *core theme*, which has one beat for each protagonist.

When a theme is involved in a conflict in a scene, those playing characters invested in that theme are each rewarded with one beat, and the theme is reduced by one beat. Thus, the more characters invested in a theme, the more valuable the theme becomes, but even in a worst-case scenario, a theme should still pay out what was put into it. Themes that attract player interest will rise, while those that don't will trickle down and eventually die. Players should make sure to keep refreshing beats into the themes they want to see continue, as themes are an important source of earning beats. Players should especially keep a close eye on the *core theme*. When this theme reaches zero, the story is ready to end.

In addition to being used to increase themes, beats are also used to make or change characters, and to activate Traits to roll additional dice in conflicts. It costs one beat to increase a theme by one on behalf of a character (adding that theme to the character's sheet, if they don't have it, for free). It also costs one beat to activate a Trait.

When it comes to creating characters, it costs one beat to make a minor character, another to improve it to a supporting character, another to turn it into a major character, and another to turn it into a protagonist. Each upgrade gives the character an additional trait. It also costs one beat to change a trait on a character to something different (or change a character's anchor), or to reduce a character to a lower rung on the character ladder (removing traits as appropriate).

Players starting a new story always begin with four beats. Beats should be tracked with some sort of counter like coins, poker chips, or glass beads. Beats are carried over between games, so each player starts each game with the same number of beats with which they ended the last game.

"Hey Bill," says Darren, "what about that Survival theme you told Charles you had a place for?"

"Oh yeah. We could use that as the core theme. It seems like something that would make sense for everyone to have invested."

Charles asks, "Core theme?"

"Yeah. It's the sort of over-arching theme, one everyone is required to have. It's supposed to show up a lot, and it rewards everyone, and also gives us an idea when the story will end."

Allison nods. "I like the idea of Survival for all of us – it fits with the fall of Atlantis and the coming of the ice age." Everyone else nods and agrees, so Bill notes it down.

"Okay, so Survival starts at a rating of four, since there's four of us. The other four themes start at two each."

"Wait a minute, Bill," says Charles. "What do those ratings mean?"

"Well, every time a theme is used in the game, it pays out a beat to every character involved that has it on their sheet, and reduces the theme by one. Beats, in turn, can be used to increase themes, or create new characters, or activate Traits to roll extra dice."

"Huh," says Darren. "Interesting. What happens when one of our personal themes goes to zero?"

"Nothing in particular. You can change themes over the course of the game, and come up with new ones. On the other hand, keep an eye on the core theme – if that one ever reaches zero, the story is over."

"Oh, that's no fun," says Charles.

"Well, if you don't want the game to end," says Allison, "then keep feeding it quarters!"

Bill laughs. "Yeah, kind of like that. Oh, and everyone starts with four beats," Bill adds, counting out four glass beads for each of them. "I think we're ready to start."

"Yeah," says Charles, "let's get this show on the road!"

"Okay," says Bill, "Everyone grab three six-sided dice, and roll them."

Adding New Players

Players wishing to join an existing story of **Ensemble** are at a slight disadvantage, since the *core theme* and other concepts of the game have already been hashed out. Nonetheless, they can still join the game just like they were new players, by creating a new protagonist, one major character, and two supporting characters (this increases the core theme by one, and creates one new theme at a value of two). On the other hand, they have an option not available to players starting the game – they can choose to appropriate existing characters, taking a major character or foil and turning them into a new protagonist.

Players choosing this option get one extra beat for each character they claim rather than make new, but must spend beats to upgrade and improve the characters being claimed, including changing anchors for supporting characters. They can create new characters or promote existing characters in any combination they wish, although they must get permission before taking the foil of any other protagonist (and that player must immediately build a new foil with their own beats, since protagonists must always have *exactly* two). In addition, they must ensure whatever character winds up as their protagonist has an investment in the *core theme* and at least one other theme, though this theme doesn't need to be unique.

Lost and Missing Players

Ensemble is meant to allow players to miss games without too much trouble. Protagonists whose players are missing simply will not show up on the screen – for the purpose of playing their foils, consider them a major character.

Sometimes, players just don't show up again. Maybe they've moved away. Maybe they were asked never to return. Maybe you never know what happened to them. But, they leave a protagonist behind, and often some dangling themes. Once the group decides that the player will not return, that protagonist is converted into a major character (dropping any one trait, by general consensus), and from that point on may be treated like one in all respects.

Playing the Game

Blocking

In the theatre, *blocking* is “the movement and positioning of actors on a stage,” and it is much the same in **Ensemble**. Each player’s blocks (the six-sided dice, as defined earlier) determine their power in positioning characters in a given scene, as well as their choice of characters. As each game progresses, players change the roles they play by passing these blocks around; but a player may always refuse an offered block.

At the beginning of each game, once the group is ready to play, each player gets three blocks – set the extra one aside for later. Simultaneously, everyone rolls their blocks, and then compares the highest roll. Whoever has the highest roll has the title of Source for the first scene. If there are ties, remove the highest-valued block from each tied player (setting them aside) and compare everyone again. If somehow all the blocks are removed (a rarity, but possible), start over. This process should be repeated any time someone joins or leaves the game.

Once the Source has been decided, that player gets all the blocks that were set aside. At absolute minimum, this will give the Source four blocks, but if there were ties, there may be far more. The players with the least blocks left are in the Spotlight for the first scene, and each get a Spotlight die (the 8-sided ones). These players must play their protagonists.

As they roll their blocks, Bill speaks up. “In Ensemble, guys, these are called blocks. We’re looking for the highest roll, that’s the person who gets to be the Source and set up the first scene. Oh, and you can’t play your protagonist either.”

The dice hit the table as follows: Allison (1,3,4), Bill (2,2,5), Charles (1,5,6) and Darren (3,5,5). Charles groans. “I just finished running that whole ski lodge game for you guys. I was hoping for a chance to play.”

“Oh, come on, Chuck, it’s not going to be for too long,” Allison says. “Remember, this is that new hippie game, where the roles keep switching around.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Charles grumbles as Bill tosses him the extra block. “Hey, Bill, what would have happened if I’d rolled 3 instead of six?”

“Hm, let’s see. Oh, okay, then everyone but Allison would have five highest. Hold on, let me check.”

While Bill flips through the book, Darren opines, “I hope it’s not as simple as just a re-roll.”

“Nope,” says Bill, who’s found the page. “We’d all remove the first fives, and compare the second highest. That would’ve made Darren the Source, since he had a second five. Darren would have gotten all three of those removed blocks, plus the one I just tossed you.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of inflation.”

“And if there’s still a tie,” says Charles, “you just remove and compare again?”

“You got it! Anyway, you’ve got 4 blocks with that extra die I just tossed you, and all three of us have three. That means all of us are in the Spotlight for the first scene, which means we all have to play our protagonists.”

“Wait, wait,” Darren says. “Why are all three of us in the Spotlight?”

“Because the Spotlight shines on the players that have the least blocks, not the least roll. Technically, the Source is the player with the most blocks, but since we all start the game with the same number of blocks, we need this first roll to set the stage.”

“Makes sense,” says Allison. “And if we’d gotten ties in the first place, maybe only one or two of us would be in the Spotlight?”

“Exactly. Oh, and each of us get an eight to go with our sixes.” Bill grabs three eight-sided dice and passes them out. “These are called Spotlight dice.”

“Hm. So, Wren, Wheel and Wolf in a scene together?” Charles muses. “What about these major characters and foils and all that that we made? Can I play them?”

“Here,” says Bill, turning the book around, “look at the chart. You can play major characters and minor characters for free, but for supporting characters, that’s the foils, you need to give one of us a block. Oh, and since it’s the first scene, use the core theme as a Focus.”

Allison twirls her hair in one of her fingers. “So what’s a minor character? Let me guess – they’re the category that gets one trait.”

Bill nods. "They're any character more important than an extra and doesn't fall into the other categories, yeah. We don't have any yet."

"Okay, well, let's get this thing started," Charles says.

If a player doesn't start off as either the Source or the Spotlight, they shouldn't worry – both roles will change often through the course of the game. Meanwhile, that player can use their blocks to try to enter the scene, if they want – or they can simply sit back and take a break from the action.

Using the Blocks

If a player wishes to play their protagonist, they must have the permission of all the Spotlight players, and give one of their blocks to each one, plus one to the Source (if they have too few blocks to afford this, they may not play their protagonist in this scene). The Source is the exception, and may not play their protagonist under any circumstances.

To play a major character, a player must have the permission of the Source and any one Spotlight character, and give them each a block. The Source effectively may play major characters for half the cost, since they'd just be giving one of those blocks to themselves, but still need the permission of one of the Spotlights.

Playing a supporting character can allow players to bring a character into the scene without involving any Spotlight or the Source. This requires them to give a block (and get permission from) the player responsible for the anchor of the supporting character. However, a player's choices are limited by where they are seating in relation to the other players. The Source is the exception – they may play any foils but their own, but must still get that player's permission, and spend blocks.

To play a supporting character, one must be sitting adjacent to the player of that character's anchor (or the Source for either a protagonist whose player is absent, or a major character not in the scene) and on the correct side of the player if the character is a foil (so, on the left side for a 'left foil' or the right side for a 'right foil'). Players may never play their protagonist's foils. **Ensemble** does not assume the seating arrangement is fixed – as players change seats, so does the availability of foils. So, if a player really wishes to play a foil, all they must do is convince the proper player to swap places.

Players may play any minor character they choose, assuming either the anchor of the character is a part of the scene, or a theme of the character is in the scene – but in either case, they get the permission of one other player in the scene, or the Source (if multiple players are willing to give permission, they may choose to whom they wish to give their block). The Source may play minor characters for free.

	If you are the Spotlight...	If you are the Source...	Otherwise...
Protagonist	Required	Not Allowed	One block to each Spotlight plus Source
Major Character	Not Allowed	One block to a Spotlight player	One block to the Source & one to any Spotlight player
Supporting Character	Not Allowed	One block to the anchor	One block to the anchor*
Minor Character	Not Allowed	Free	One block to any player in the scene

*Player must be adjacent to the anchor's player, and on the correct side for foils.

Creating New Characters

Extras can be created and narrated without issue – they are not 'owned' by anyone, but just mill around the scene, and anyone may narrate them doing anything. Players may play as many extras as they desire, and may spend beats to upgrade any extra they're playing to a higher place in the character hierarchy. If this means they can't play the character anymore, that character must be passed to the Source.

Players may turn any extra they're playing into a minor character by spending one beat. The anchor for the minor character must be chosen immediately, and must be something in the scene. The player must still sacrifice a block to any other player in the scene if they want to keep playing that character, and are able; otherwise, the character goes to the Source.

New supporting characters can only be created (or removed) while playing the appropriate anchor. One beat will promote a minor character into a supporting character, or demote a major character into a supporting character (though this latter may only be done by the Source). One beat can also be used to change the anchor of a supporting character. Two beats can create an entirely new supporting character. Remember, after all these changes, each protagonist must have exactly *two* supporting characters.

New major characters may only be created by the Source. These cost 3 beats if created from scratch; also, one beat can upgrade a supporting character, or two can upgrade a minor character. Remember, when upgrading a supporting character, to make sure afterwards each protagonist has the right number of foils.

Protagonists may only be changed in **Ensemble** between games. It costs one beat to demote a protagonist to a major character (which must be done first). After that, one beat may upgrade an existing major character to a protagonist, or two beats for a supporting character, three beats for a minor character, or four to make one from scratch. After all these changes, the new protagonist must have exactly two supporting characters to act as foils, which may require spending even more beats to change anchors or create new characters.

Whenever beats are spent to create, upgrade, or downgrade a character, additional beats may be spent to add themes to that character. If a downgraded character has more traits or themes than it can support, it sheds the extras automatically. The player that spent the beat chooses which ones are shed.

Scenes and Conflicts

It is the responsibility of the Source to set up each scene. This isn't as hard as it sounds – after all, what characters will be featured in the scene is already established for them, through the Spotlights. In exchange for this duty, they get to introduce and play major and minor characters with impunity (as well as others if they want to spend the blocks), and have a say in every conflict in the scene, even if they're not playing any characters that are involved.

Before each scene opens, the Source should choose one theme the Spotlights all share and inform the group of this choice – this becomes the Focus of the scene, and should be involved in every conflict in the scene. The first Focus of any **Ensemble** game should always be the *core theme*.

Meanwhile, any players without any special status should be deciding what character, if any, they want to play (the Spotlight players, as well as the Source, are free to make suggestions and requests, but in the end, it's each player's choice whether to spend blocks to play a character). Keep in mind, players don't have to decide immediately! They can choose to join the scene at any time.

Charles cracks his knuckles. "So, this Focus thing. I just have to make sure the scene revolves around the idea of Survival, right?"

"Right," says Bill. "Including the first conflict."

"Okay, I think I've got an idea."

"Go right ahead, Source," Darren gestures, dramatically.

"Y'all know the storytelling device called in media res? Well, whether or not you know about it, you're about to face it. Wheel, Wolf and Wren are clambering up a mountain and into a small cave. Behind them comes One-Eye, the fire-breathing Tyrannosaurus!"

"Chuck," Bill says, "you have to give one of us a block to use a major character."

"Any one of you?" Chuck shrugs and tosses a block to Bill. "He's your T-rex."

Darren goes, "Why are we being chased?"

"Silly!" Allison rolls her eyes. "Why we're being chased really doesn't matter. I'm sure we'll find out eventually."

"Yep," says Charles, "that's the plan. One-Eye lets off a thunderous roar. Lucky for you guys, the cave is too small for him to fit his head inside. Of course, he can still make it a bit hot for you guys to handle."

Bill chuckles. "Wasting no time getting to the conflict, huh?"

Charles grins at Bill. "Why would I? I said I wanted to play. Besides, this is such a perfect opening scene – can't you imagine it at the start of a movie or something, to introduce the whole thing?"

"Oh yeah, definitely," says Allison. "I can totally see that."

It is the Source's responsibility to drive each scene towards conflicts involving the Focus, if the scene isn't flowing there naturally. But don't simply go chasing the conflicts! Let the scene develop to a conflict organically, with gentle nudges. Remember, the largest explosions sometimes start with the slowest burn.

The Source is not the only one with responsibility, though. The Focus is a theme that belongs to all the Spotlights, by definition – those players chose to invest their characters in the theme for a reason, and should be pursuing that reason now. Other protagonists and major characters in the scene should also look for ways to explore that theme with the Spotlight characters (especially if they also are invested in the theme). Supporting characters are there to support their anchors, showing off their faults, and their virtues; this can be done even if the anchor is not present! Minor characters are just there for additional viewpoints, providing variations on a theme. In all cases, players not in the Spotlight should be careful not to steal it – it is not their scene, after all.

Goals

Conflicts are central to the telling of stories – without conflicts, events often fail to propel the characters forward. As play happens during the scene, all the players should keep the Focus in mind, and work towards a conflict involving that focus. Anyone can declare that a conflict is happening, though the Source in particular should keep an eye out and decide if something should be treated as a conflict (and introduce new things, if no conflict seems to be on the horizon).

Once a conflict has been recognized, each player should decide whether or not the characters they're playing would be involved. While conflicts in **Ensemble** always involve the Focus, they may also involve other themes, and players should identify other themes on their characters that might be applicable. If there's any question, the current Source is the final arbiter over what themes might apply to the conflict.

Once a conflict is recognized and the themes are chosen, the players should decide what gets to be decided by the winner. What are the characters trying to accomplish? What might be gained, or lost? Conflicts can be focused razor-thin (do I strike him with my sword?), or be extremely broad (do we win this war?), depending on the scope of the scene and the story. Conflicts are most often external, between characters, but can sometimes be internal for a given character.

"Wolf hefts his spear," Darren says. "It is ON!"

"So Bill," says Darren, "since this is a conflict, how do we resolve it?"

"Well, first we need to figure out what our goals are. It's pretty simple in this case, right? We want to run One-Eye off?"

"Well, One-Eye is definitely wanting to get you guys," says Charles.

"Yeah, that works for me," says Allison. "I'm not sure how Wren would participate though..."

"Well, Wolf's going after One-Eye, trying to drive him away!"

"So's Wheel. He's got this weird exploding powder he wants to try."

Darren rolls his eyes. "Oh, come on, gunpowder?"

"What?" Bill looks the picture of innocence. "It's not like we even have METAL. I won't be making guns or anything."

Allison pipes up. "We have Atlantis and fire-breathing tyrannosaurs, and you're going to complain about gunpowder?"

"Okay, okay," says Darren. "Let's do this."

Charles turns to Allison. "What's Wren doing?"

"Wren doesn't care too much about these boys and their violence," Allison says. "She's going to do her shaman stuff – some sort of magic thing to find out what One-Eye wants, maybe even befriend it."

"Your own goal," Charles says, "Awesome."

"Well," says Bill, "each one of us involved rolls our blocks, and the Spotlight dice for those of us who have them. Oh, before we continue, we should see if there's any other themes involved. I think Adventure! is probably involved on top of Survival. Can you think of any other themes that might be present?"

"This is a bad Omen," says Allison. "Definitely."

"Well, I think this is an obvious case of Wolf doing his Duty. He's protecting his fellow tribe-members, as a warrior should." Getting into it, Darren speaks in character. "'Get behind me you two, I'll take care of him!'"

"I'll allow the Duty one," Charles says, waving his hand. "Let's see if Omens can't find a better use later."

Allison sticks out her lip to pout. "Well, I guess..."

"Charles is the authority," Bill cuts in before the game can be derailed. "Okay, let's roll."

Execution

Dice are the tools **Ensemble** uses to decide conflicts. Every player playing a character involved in the conflict rolls all their blocks – the Spotlight players also roll their Spotlight die. Remember, extras don't count – if a player is only playing an extra, they may not participate in the conflict in any meaningful way, so this is a good time to spend those beats! The Source always rolls (though only once, regardless of how many characters the Source controls).

Everyone rolls simultaneously – separate out the odd numbers, these are each player's successes. Before these successes are set in stone, however, any player may spend a beat to bring in a character's Trait, if they're willing to do a small bit of additional narration to show how the Trait is being used to affect the outcome. In return for that narration, they may roll a Trait die (a four-sided die, remember) to try for an additional success. Players may spend as many beats as they have Traits they can narrate.

The dice fall on the table. Allison rolls 3,5,6,6 (the 3 is her Spotlight die). Bill rolls 1,4,5,5,6 (the 1 is his Spotlight die). Darren rolls 4,4,6,6 (his Spotlight die is a 6). Charles, meanwhile, rolls 1,3,5.

"Okay," says Bill, "we count the odd numbers. Allison got two odds, I got three, Darren got none, and Charles got three..."

"Assuming that the three of our characters are all working together against Charles, that's five against three."

"No way am I working with you two," Allison says. "Get away from that poor dinosaur, hasn't he been through enough?!"

Charles counts. "Okay, so it's me vs. Bill at three, and Allison with two." Charles looks to Bill. "Hey, let me see that book. How do we break ties?"

"Well, we remove the lowest block from everyone, so... that'd make it Allison 1, me two, you two. Do that a second time and it's Allison zero, me two, you one."

Darren nods. "And you can spend a beat to bring in a Trait. That gives you another die to roll."

Allison throws two beats into the ring. "Wren's young and foolish, and is a shaman to boot. 'O mighty fire lizard, calm yourself. I am sure these boys meant no harm. Please, calm yourself and let us know how we can repay you for your lost eye.'" Allison throws two Trait dice – they come up a 1 and a 4.

Resolution

Players with similar goals may have their characters combine their success – in many conflicts, there are only two identifiable sides, but there can be as many sides as there are participating characters. Regardless of how many characters the Source is playing, that player may not split their blocks amongst multiple sides. However, if rolled, the Source can split any Trait dice for various characters between sides as desired.

After all the traits have been rolled and the final battle lines have been drawn, count the successes for each side, combined. If there's a tie, remove the lowest die (success or failure) from each *player* and re-count. The side with the highest number of successes wins the conflict, and the outcome must bring their intent to fruition. If one side runs out of dice, the other side wins.

Regardless of which side won the conflict, the player who rolled the highest single die narrates the result – in the case of ties, simply look at the next highest number of the tied rollers. The narrator can play any character in the scene while narrating, and introduce new extras as needed, and is welcome to ask for suggestions from other players. The narrator's goal – to establish the result decided by the dice, in any manner they so choose.

In addition, for each 1 rolled (even those removed to break ties), each player may dictate one fact that must be included in the narration, as long as this fact does not significantly change the outcome of the contest (turning a success into failure, or vice versa). The narrator is exempt from this – after all, that player has the final authority over how the conflict plays out – these facts are the other players' opportunity to throw twists or clarifications into what happens.

“Well,” says Bill, “now Allison has three odds also, and it looks like the tie will go her way now. You can side with me if you want, Charles – that way, it'll be six to three.”

Charles shakes his head. “I like her idea better, and I think I'll stick to my blocks. I'll side with Allison.”

Allison claps her hands. “Yay! Take that, Bill. Six to three!”

“Well, I don't really like those odds,” Bill says. “Not without help at least. Darren?”

“Hmm. I think I'll hang on to my beats for now.”

Bill nods. “Okay! Well, highest die narrates, so that's... hrm, Allison and Darren both have two sixes, so on their third highest die, Allison's got a 5 to Darren's 4. But before we narrate, Chuck and I rolled one 1 apiece. That means we each dictate one fact in the resolution.”

Allison pouts. “What about me? I rolled a 1 too!”

“Yeah,” says Darren, “but you get to narrate everything already!”

“Oh yeah.” Allison blushes.

“I'm going to say One-Eye is a girl,” says Chuck. “Maybe her eggs are nearby.”

“Oh, interesting, Chuck!” Bill turns to Allison. “And I'm going to say the T-Rex's firey breath causes my powder to explode.”

Darren laughs. “You really like that gunpowder, don't you?” He gestures dramatically. “Go right ahead, Allison. I want to hear how it turns out.”

Rewards

Once the conflict has been narrated, every player should count the number of successful Trait and Spotlight dice they rolled; this is the maximum number of beats they may award, *immediately*, to other players for anything they thought was cool. These rewards cannot be saved – if they're not given out immediately, they simply vanish. It's best if players tell the recipient of their gift exactly *why* they are giving it out, and what they thought was cool.

After those rewards are complete, go through each theme used in the conflict, starting with the Focus, and for each character in the scene invested in the theme, give the player of the character a beat (the Source can come out like a bandit in this, since they may have multiple characters from which they can collect). This is regardless of participation in the conflict – simple presence in the scene is sufficient. Then, each involved theme's value is reduced by one point, regardless of how many characters earned a beat from them.

“That was awesome, Allison,” says Charles, after she's done narrating. “Really captured the thrill of the moment. And you incorporated all our facts and suggestions easily.”

“Thank you, Chuck,” she says, sticking her tongue out at him, then turns to Bill. “So, now what?”

“Beats,” says Bill. “Allison rolled one successful trait die, that means she has one beat she can give out to anyone. She also rolled a success on her Spotlight die, as did I, so we can both give out an additional beat to anyone. In this case, that’s just Chuck.”

“I’m giving both of mine to Chuck,” Allison says, “he sided with me in the end.”

“Hey Bill. What happens if you don’t want to give it to anyone?” Darren says. “Can you keep it?”

“Nope,” says Bill, flipping through the book, “it just goes away, so nobody gets it. No way am I giving it to Chuck, he sided against me, and I really loved Allison’s narration, so here you go, hon.” He passes the beat across the table.

“Gee, thanks!” Allison says.

“No big loss,” says Charles, shrugging. “Allison just gave me two after all.”

“We should pay out the Themes next. Darren, you and I both gets two beats, one for Survival, and one for our other theme. Allison, you get just the one for Survival. Charles, you get a beat for Adventure, since the T-Rex has it too. Each of those themes goes down by one.”

Changes

Once all the beats are rewarded, players may spend their beats in a number of ways.

First, they can spend their beats to increase any theme used in the scene. They must do this on behalf of either their protagonist, their foils, or the character(s) they were playing. If they invest for a character that does not have a theme on their sheet, they *must* add it to their sheet. Remember, characters may never have more themes than they have traits – if a character is already full, it costs one beat to remove a theme from a character.

Players can also spend one beat to change one trait of any character they played in the scene – though each trait may not be changed more than once a game. They may also promote any extra in the scene they feel they'd like to see again (and, of course, invest into themes on their behalf as well). Finally, they may create a new theme for their protagonist, if they wish, or invest their protagonist into a new theme just created by another player.

Everyone takes the appropriate number of beads as Bill updates the theme tracker. “I’m throwing one of my beats back into Adventure!, I think. The other, I’ll throw into a new theme for Wheel, Discovery.”

“And I’m going to put one beat into the ‘fall of Atlantis’,” says Charles. “For my golem. I like Discovery, so I’ll grab onto that one with another beat, for Uriel. The other one I’m keeping.”

“I think I’m going to invest my sister in the Omens,” Allison says. “And my illicit lover gets a beat in Fall of Atlantis.” Allison pouts. “I’m down to one!”

“Don’t worry,” says Bill. “You’ll get more soon, I’m sure.”

“I’m tempted to hang on to these two beats,” Darren says. “But, instead I’ll invest my new wife in Duty. After all, part of my duty is to create the next generation. And the other warrior too – he’s got his own duty. There they go.”

Blocking

After every conflict, the Source must give away all their blocks that rolled successes to the participants in the conflict, though at least one must go to the player that won narration. Besides that, they can spread them out in any combination desired – all to one player, or spread out equally, or anything in between. The Source should give these to the players that most impressed them with their performance in the scene. This is the one time players may not refuse blocks.

Once that is done, check the distribution of blocks around the table – the person with the most blocks should be Source, and the person (or people) with the least should be Spotlight (and be given a Spotlight die, while the old Spotlight players should relinquish theirs). If there’s either a new Source, or a new Spotlight, the scene ends after the conflict. If two players tie for the most blocks, there is a special scene called an Interlude to determine the new Source, which is handled slightly differently (see below). The Interlude is also the only time in **Ensemble** where there is a scene without any protagonists.

Remember, a scene ending does not mean the action has ended – it's always possible to return to the action, and continue it! A huge fight scene involving all the protagonists could quite easily switch through several different scenes covering the same event, showing the smaller clashes as they all build towards a dramatic climax. Or, of course, the Source could choose to switch to a different scene, leaving the previous scene on a cliffhanger until the next time it's visited.

Bill updates the theme tracker, then continues, "Well, now Chuck gives out three blocks to us, since he rolled 3 successes. He can give them out in any pattern he wants, to anyone who participated. This time around, that's all of us. Oh, Allison has to get at least one."

Allison chews her lip in thought. "Is that 'cause I narrated?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I liked what you all did." Charles says, "And I'm tempted to spread them around, so I'll give one more to Allison, and one to Bill." Now Charles has zero blocks, Darren has three, and both Bill and Allison have five.

"Okay, so Uriel's in the Spotlight now, since he's got no blocks." Bill double-checks the book, then adds, "The scene's over."

"Now wait a minute, Bill," says Darren, "Isn't Charles kind of screwed? He's got no dice he can roll."

"Nope," says Charles. "I still have Traits to call on, and of course the Spotlight die."

"Plus if you guys want to play characters, he's got a good chance of getting some of those dice."

"And since we both have the most," says Allison. "Do we share the Source?"

"Nope," says Bill. "We've got to do an Interlude."

Interludes

Whenever there's a question over who gets to be the next Source, that triggers a special kind of scene called an Interlude. The Interlude scene is a chance for the major characters to stretch their legs without any protagonists hogging the Spotlight, and for supporting characters to show their true mettle. As such, it is forbidden to play protagonists during an Interlude.

Every player that is up for being Source must choose a major character and/or any supporting character that is not a foil. This is the character they will play in the scene (giving up no blocks to do so) – they are considered in the Spotlight for this scene, though they do not get rewarded with Spotlight dice. Everyone else may pay blocks to play characters as normal, ignoring any 'give blocks to the Source' references and, of course, not playing their protagonists.

The person who sets up the scene is the player that won narration in the last scene. Unlike the protagonists, these characters aren't guaranteed to share a particular theme (or even to have a theme at all), so Interludes have no particular Focus. Nonetheless, players should keep an eye out for conflicts – Interludes are here to show us some change or emphasis, some clash that will let us know more about the situation for the protagonists, and what they might be facing.

Interludes continue until a conflict occurs, at which point the blocks are rolled as normal, and beats can be spent to bring in Traits and so forth. Once everything is done, during the final blocking stage, instead of the Source giving away blocks (as there is no Source), compare the *totals* of all the dice rolled by the players who were up to be Source – the player with the highest sum is the Source for the next scene. If the sums equal, remove the lowest die from each member and compare again, repeating until the tie is broken.

"I'll admit," Charles says, "I kind of did this on purpose. I wanted to see how an Interlude would play out."

"Hold up," says Allison. "What's an Interlude?"

Bill says, "It's the one time you can have a scene without any protagonists. Since you and me are currently in the running, each of us has to pick a main character to play – or one of their supporting characters if they had any, but it's a bit early in the game to have that."

"So main characters can have foils too?" Darren asks.

“Not quite foils,” says Bill, “but they can anchor any supporting characters you might make, definitely. Allison, I’m thinking of a scene with the chief and the medicine woman.”

“Oh that’s perfect,” she says. “I imagine they’re somewhat concerned since our characters were gone for so long. I’ll take the chief.”

Bill laughs. “Okay, then the medicine woman is mine.”

“Allison sets up the Interlude, right?” Charles asks. “Since she won narration and all.”

“Yeah,” Darren says, flipping through the text. “That’s what it says.”

“Okay then,” says Allison. “Let’s see if we can get in a bit more roleplaying before we cut to the conflict this time.” She shoots a friendly glare at Charles, then winks. “Bill, Charles, do you want in?”

“I’ve got no blocks,” says Charles. “I’ll play an extra or two, maybe.”

“I’m fine for now,” says Darren. “Maybe I’ll come in later.”

“Works for me,” says Allison. “Now let’s see, how do I want this scene to start out?”

Although most scenes should have conflicts, not all scenes will. Any Spotlight player may choose to end a scene at any time, by spending a beat, as long as a conflict has not already been put in motion. The Source, at this point, gives a block to the Spotlight player that called the end of the scene. Where multiple players share the Spotlight, any one of them may choose to end the scene – and that is the player to get the block from the Source. Sometimes this will result in a new Spotlight or Source, as described above.

Note that, since Interludes have no specific Source or Spotlight, this cannot be done during one.

Endings

When the *core theme* is emptied of beats, it's time for the story to end. If any player doesn't want this to happen yet, they should make sure to keep investing beats in the core theme, so it won't empty. From that point forward, nobody may invest in any themes. Players should try to give each remaining theme one final chance to appear in the story, either to tie them up, or maybe leave them open for the next story, perhaps even on a cliffhanger. At the end of that game, the story is over, so make the most of it.

At this point, the players may choose to end the game, or perhaps move on to the next arc. If the players are choosing to move on, they must choose a new *core theme*, either by cribbing from the themes that remain open, or by spending their beats to create a brand-new one (or re-create the old one). Like the previous arc, the new theme should begin with at least an investment equal to the number of protagonists in the story.

Credits

- Thanks to all the people in #indierpgs on the MagicStar IRC network, and the Foundry MUSH at port 7777 of legendary.org, for dealing with my musing and rambling about the game. It was in #indierpgs that the seed for this game was first planted.
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Special Bonus Track

Die Sizes?

The reason behind the different sizes of dice should be clear: **Ensemble** can vary the ability for players to claim the narration of a conflict's outcome (more likely with larger dice) and establish Facts (more likely with smaller dice).

A player in the Spotlight has few blocks, but has a good chance of rolling higher than any other contender without completely dominating the competition (after all, there's only a 25% chance that the Spotlight die will roll higher than any other die can reach). On the other side, traits are set up specifically to influence a conflict's outcome without generally changing narration rights (since the blocks and Spotlight dice can roll higher than 4, which is the highest value a Trait Die can achieve).

As a useful side effect, it makes it easier to reclaim blocks after a conflict: blocks are a particular *shape*, so there's no hassle in picking them out from the rest.

Seating Arrangement

It's important that the player of each foil be sitting next to the anchor – the proximity encourages the dramatic link between the two characters. In the game's early days, there was talk of rules that would require players to change seats, to shake up who plays which foil more regularly. However, this can be a hassle depending on the organization of the gaming space, so it was decided to leave it up to each individual group.

If you're interested in something more regular, use this rule: *after each narration, the Source and the player that won narration must switch seats*. If those are the same person, of course, nobody moves. The rule is a rigorous and good one, it just can be inconvenient depending on the physical space available to play, which is why it's not included in the main text.