

CONSPIRACY

This is a GM-less story game about conspiracy thrillers. It can be played by 1-5 players and it uses a deck of standard poker cards.

What you need to play

To play this game you need between one and five players, including yourself. You could in theory play with more, but people might not get the chance to participate enough if you play with more than five. You will also need a standard poker card deck without jokers and, although not necessary, a pencil and a printed copy of the story sheet (see at the end) will be useful.

Please consider using the [X-Card](#), [lines and veils](#), [script change](#), or whichever other safety tool you know and works for your group.

Preparing a game

Shuffle the deck of cards. Decide if you want to start by defining one facet of the conspiracy, or the player characters. If the former, you will start with the “Seed of conflict” scene, then do the “Inciting incident” scene. If the latter, you will start with the “Inciting incident” scene, then do the “Seed of conflict” scene. After the first two scenes, the rest are always the same, in the same order.

Structure of the game

A story told with Conspiracy will consist of ten scenes. Each scene has a name and a purpose, and some of them will require you to draw a card. Players will take turns to tell and resolve each scene (thus becoming the *active player* for that scene), although all players are expected to participate and contribute. As you play out more scenes, you will slowly uncover the conspiracy. The conspiracy has six facets, and by the end of the story you will have decided all six. There are five types of endings, each better than the last, and depending on your luck you will get a different type of ending.

Defining the protagonists

In the “Inciting incident” scene, ie. one of the two first scenes in the story, you will have to define who the protagonists are. There should be one protagonist for every player. Each protagonist is defined by a name, a description (say, one adjective for its physical appearance and one for its personality, but feel free to elaborate more if you have a clear picture), and its *wants and fears*.

The wants and fears can help make the character morally ambiguous, bring conflicts with other protagonists, and give you ideas to how they can get in trouble when uncovering the conspiracy. Many possibilities could be seen as *both* want and fear, so don't worry about the difference. Try to come up with two for each character, but one is fine. Examples: committed a crime that they never went to jail for (wants closure/to be forgiven); values his family and friends' well-being over any other person's life (fears anything bad will happen to close ones); secretly hates another protagonist and doesn't want them to end up better off (fears “losing” to this character); is addicted to

something expensive (fear of running out of the substance); has a condition that could come up again at any moment (wants reassurance things are going to be fine), has a phobia or a trauma (fear for well-being), wants to show achievements to peers or family (wants acceptance or respect), etc.

Facets of the conspiracy

A conspiracy in this game is defined by six facets. These facets will be discovered throughout the game, so they will be as surprising for the protagonists as for the players. The facets are:

1. *Who the conspirators are.* A group of scientists, a group of a certain ethnicity, aliens, ...
2. *Name.* The name of the conspiring group.
3. *Structure.* Secret society, rogue section of a well-known organisation, etc...
4. *Goal.* To kill a certain group of people, to obtain power, to survive a catastrophe, ...
5. *Methods.* Murder, cover-up, starting wars, illegal activities, ...
6. *The Head.* The person who heads the conspiracy. Are they analytical? Manipulative? Charming? Sophisticated? Sharply dressed? Physically intimidating? Violent? Do their personal goals completely align with the conspiracy's?

Scenes that uncover a facet of the conspiracy

Some scenes will uncover a facet of the conspiracy. This means that all players have to agree and decide the contents of the facet specified by the scene. Sometimes you will be able to choose a facet from several, but in any case remember that you cannot uncover the same facet more than once (so that, by the end of the game, you will have discovered all six). Normally, the characters will also find out about the facet *in that same scene*, but it's not necessary, eg. the players could decide that a complication means that the characters cannot make sense of it yet.

When a scene both uncovers a facet and has challenges, uncover the facet first.

Scenes with challenges

Scenes with challenges are scenes that can end up with a full success, partial success (success plus a complication), or failure (a complication). Before you solve such a scene, you draw a card. If the card is a J, Q, or K, it's a full success. If the card is 6 to 10, it's a partial success. If the card is 2 to 5, it's a failure. If the card is an ace, and (1) there is no *mole* in the story and (2) there are at least two players, that means that the active player's character becomes the mole, ie. an antagonist that pretends to be on the side of the protagonists. It's not necessary that the other *characters* are aware of that fact, it could be that only the players are aware of it for now. If there is already a mole in the story, an ace becomes a regular failure.

In this context, "success" means that the protagonists get what they wanted. See each scene for ideas. And "complications" are something that makes the fight against the conspirators harder, something that goes wrong in the plan (like reading some documents but not being able to keep them), or something that raises the stakes in some way.

A full success gives two *victory points*, and a partial success gives one victory point. Keep track of these, because you will need them for the epilogue.

Playing out scenes

For each scene, the active player will choose the general idea or type for the scene. If the scene uncovers a facet of the conspiracy, its contents are decided together with the idea for the scene. There are a number of prompts and ideas in the story sheet, for inspiration, but you don't have to use them.

Once the scene idea is chosen (eg. "We are going to talk to Z, the mysterious informant that contacted us in the last scene, to learn about where the conspirators meet"), the active player will decide the location and which characters are in it. Every player will play their own character in the scene. By default, the active player will also play every other non-protagonist character. If a card has to be drawn, it is drawn now, before starting the scene proper. The result of the card will decide whether the protagonists got what they wanted, and if there are any complications.

Now the scene is played out, with the active player deciding what happens, and the other players reacting to it. In investigation scenes, a failure usually means that the protagonists cannot obtain the clue, or that they do but they cannot make sense of it. But do whatever makes sense and is interesting for your story. Try to remember all the unused clues for later scenes, in which you might be able to use those clues as foreshadowing for whatever you come up with later.

Scene breakdown

There are always ten scenes in a game of Conspiracy. They are always in the same order, except that the first two can be swapped (see "Preparing a game" above). Some of these scenes uncover a facet of the conspiracy (those are marked with a puzzle piece), some of them have challenges (those are marked with a card), and some have both.

Seed of conflict

This happens months, maybe years before the rest of the story, and sets up the conspiracy, uncovering the first facet.

Facets you can uncover in this scene: Who the conspirators are, Goal.

Inciting incident

The protagonists catch a glimpse of the conspiracy and are made aware that there's something strange that sparks their curiosity. In these scenes, the protagonists are defined and presented.

Facet you uncover in this scene: Methods.

First threshold

The first opposition the protagonists find, eg. someone tells them to stop their investigation or else.

Meaning of success: simply "lack of complication", as there's little to gain for the protagonists here, eg. getting away from a pursuer, avoiding getting into trouble, or similar.

Commitment

The point of no return for the protagonists: they are too involved in the investigation and must press on until the end.

3 x Investigation

The investigation moments in which the protagonists learn and discover things about the conspiracy. It's three different scenes in a row.

Facets you can uncover in this scene: Structure, Name, The Head. You will uncover all three, one per scene, in whichever order you choose.

Meaning of success: the protagonists find a document, get to talk to someone who gives them information, find a secret location, follow the money trail to a new organisation, ...

Defeat

The lowest point for the protagonists, when they suffer a crushing defeat in the hands of the agents of the conspiracy.

Final battle

The final encounter between the protagonists and the Head of the conspiracy, where the protagonists learn the last details about the conspiracy, and its decided to what extent they defeat it, if at all.

Facets you can uncover in this scene: Who the conspirators are, Goal. Whichever you didn't already choose in the Seed of conflict scene.

Meaning of success: the protagonist's plan works relatively well, but at this point you will already know how many victory points you will have at the end, so use that as a guide for how the scene should play out.

Epilogue

The fate of the protagonists and the fate of the conspiracy, possibly happening weeks, months, or even years later. There are five possible types of endings/epilogues, depending on the number of victory points gained by the group:

1. If the group gained less than 3 victory points, the protagonists fail and they will be forced to live for the rest of their lives with this failure, maybe even being forced to be part of the conspiracy.
2. If the group gained 3 points, the protagonists tragically die without being able to stop the conspiracy.
3. If the group gained 4 or 5 points, they defeat The Head of the conspiracy but don't manage to stop the conspiracy itself.
4. If the group gained 6 points, they stop the conspiracy but The Head escapes unpunished.
5. If the group gained 7 or more points, they defeat The Head of the conspiracy and stop the conspiracy itself, but at a high cost: jail, lose marriage or job, becoming an outcast, being blamed for the conspiracy.

As you can see, there are no happy endings in this game.

Colophon

This game was designed by Esteban Manchado Velázquez for [NO DICE jam](#). It uses the fonts [Top Secret](#) (title), [My Underwood](#) (section headings) and [Liberation Serif](#) (text body).

In the making of this game, these were the main resources consulted:

- [TV Tropes: So You Want To / Write a Conspiracy Theory](#)
- [9-Act Screenplay Structure—Plotting Resource](#)
- [The 5 C's of Writing a Great Thriller Novel](#)
- [10 Basic Ingredients of a Successful Thriller](#)
- [Hillfolk](#) (specifically, the list of desire choices on p. 13)

The protagonists

Name: _____ Description: _____

Wants and fears: _____

Name: _____ Description: _____

Wants and fears: _____

Name: _____ Description: _____

Wants and fears: _____

Name: _____ Description: _____

Wants and fears: _____

Name: _____ Description: _____

Wants and fears: _____

Challenges

Victory points: _____

Challenge resolution



Mole /
Comp.



Complication



Complication +
1 victory point



2 victory points

Scenes

Seed of conflict

Mysterious meeting / A message is received /
Someone loses a ton of money

Uncover one of: Who / Goal

Inciting incident

Someone is murdered / Someone disappears /
Incriminating document / Mysterious note /
Witnessing something they shouldn't have

Uncover: Methods

First threshold

Men in black show up / Strange accidents /
Character's boss receives pressure from above

Complication prompts: Protagonist conflict /
Evidence disappears / Eerie visit /
People think protagonists are crazy

Commitment

Protagonist conflict / Moral reasons /
Conspiracy threatens someone close /
Protagonists on their own now /
Someone saw protagonists in a crime scene

Investigation x 3

Meet anonymous informant / Find a document /
Find relevant news articles / Talk to someone
leaving the conspiracy / Find a crime scene /
Find a key, secret place for the conspiracy /
Tap into the conspiracy communications

**Uncover these, one per scene, in whichever
order:** Name, The Head, Structure

Complication prompts: Protagonist conflict /
Innocent dies / Cannot make sense of the
new information / Info is planted red herring /
Important weapon or contact lost /
A trace or clue left for the Conspiracy

The conspiracy

Who

Intellectuals / Scientists / Ethnic group /
Government / Bankers / Cultist / Aliens /
Other _____

Goal

Power / Destruction of some group /
Profit / Survival /
Other _____

Methods

Murder / Mass destruction / Sacrifices /
Kidnapping / Human experiments /
Water or food tampering / Cover-up /
Blackmail / Starting wars /
Other _____

Name

_____ Society/Clan/Fund/Club /
Brotherhood/Order of _____ /
Project _____ /
Other _____

The Head

Structure

Secret society / Crime confederation /
Group of a powerful but benevolent org /
Other _____

Defeat

Protagonist conflict used as blackmail /
Protagonists beaten up and left to die /
Protagonists framed and sent to jail /
All evidence destroyed / Allies lost or dead

Final battle

Conspiracy deserter helps protagonists /
Previous defeat gains unexpected ally /
Bait is used against The Head

Uncover the missing one: Who / Goal
Complication prompts: Protagonist conflict /
Innocent dies / Protagonist betrays principles

Epilogue

0-2 VP - Have to live with the
failure, maybe as part of the conspiracy
3 VP - Tragic death
4-5 VP - The Head defeated, not conspiracy
6 VP - Conspiracy defeated but responsible
parties are free
7+ VP - Conspiracy defeated but great cost