

# Formless

A Framework for

# Collaborative Roleplaying


# Formless

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FORMLESS HAS BEEN AROUND FOR ABOUT THREE YEARS AND HAS NOW SEEN THREE INCARNATIONS (THIS BEING THE THIRD). ALTHOUGH THE BASIC DESIGN GOALS OF FORMLESS AND THE PHILOSOPHIES UNDERLYING FORMLESS HAVE REMAINED UNCHANGED, THIS INCARNATION HAS TAKEN A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THOSE GOALS AND PHILOSOPHIES. FORMLESS IS A MINIMALIST AFFAIR DESIGNED TO BE TRANSPARENT AND ADAPTABLE. UNCONCERNED WITH STATISTICAL PROBABILITY AND THE CRUNCHING OF NUMBERS, FORMLESS IS DESIGNED TO FACILITATE TELLING STORIES AND HAVING FUN. WHETHER FORMLESS SUCCEEDS AT MEETING THESE DESIGN GOALS IS, OF COURSE, A DETERMINATION ULTIMATELY LEFT UP TO YOU.

AS WITH PREVIOUS VERSIONS OF FORMLESS, THE IDEAS PRESENTED HERE ARE LARGELY DEPENDENT UPON COMMON SENSE AND COOPERATION BETWEEN THE VARIOUS PLAYERS. FORMLESS IS, BY DEFAULT, A COLLABORATIVE ROLEPLAYING FRAMEWORK—THAT IS, A METHOD OF ROLEPLAYING THAT SPLITS THE USUAL RESPONSIBILITY OF A SOLE REFEREE AMONG ALL OF THE PLAYERS. TO THIS END, FORMLESS OPERATES WHOLLY ON THE GOOD FAITH ASSUMPTION THAT WHEN PEOPLE SIT DOWN TO ROLEPLAY, THEY'RE DOING SO IN THE INTEREST OF HAVING A GOOD TIME. INSTEAD OF RELYING ON DICE, POINT BIDDING, OR OTHER SIMILAR METHODS USED TO RESOLVE CONFLICT AND CREATE DRAMA, FORMLESS IS DRIVEN ONLY BY WORDS.

FORMLESS IS, AT ITS CORE, A SET OF IDEAS AND GUIDELINES AS OPPOSED TO A HARD AND FAST SET OF RULES. IN FACT, IT MIGHT BE MORE ACCURATE TO SAY THAT FORMLESS IS A KIND OF PRIMER FOR A VERY SPECIFIC STYLE OF ROLEPLAYING. AS SUCH, FORMLESS MAY BE UTILIZED AS A META-SYSTEM, AN IDEOLOGY THAT CAN BE GRAFTED ONTO OTHER PUBLISHED ROLEPLAYING GAMES. INDEED, THE APPLICATION OF IDEAS FOUND IN FORMLESS TO OTHER ROLEPLAYING GAMES IS WHOLEHEARTEDLY ENDORSED, ESPECIALLY IF YOU FEEL THAT IN DOING SO YOU CAN INCREASE YOUR ENJOYMENT OF OTHER GAMES. HOW YOU APPLY THESE IDEAS TO OTHER GAMES IS ULTIMATELY LEFT UP TO YOU (ALTHOUGH A FEW SUGGESTIONS ARE INCLUDED), FORMLESS MERELY ESTABLISHES A SIMPLE FRAMEWORK TO GET YOU STARTED.

FORMLESS IS BASED UPON AN IDEA ORIGINATED BY STEVE DARLINGTON, AND HAS DRAWN A LARGE AMOUNT OF INSPIRATION FROM OTHER PUBLISHED GAMES SINCE ITS INITIAL INCEPTION, MOST NOTABLY PETER SUBER'S *NOMIC* AND JAMES V. WEST'S *THE POOL*. ADDITIONALLY, CORRESPONDENCE WITH JACK SPENCER JR. VIA EMAIL AND INTERNET FORUMS PROVED TO BE INVALUABLE WHILE DESIGNING FORMLESS (BE SURE TO CHECK OUT JACK'S OWN FREEFORM ROLEPLAYING EFFORT, ENTITLED *THE WHEEL*). THE AUTHOR ALSO OWES A DEBT OF GRATITUDE TO SEVERAL INDIVIDUALS INCLUDING BELAC, CPXB, BRETT BERNSTEIN, AND "SUPPLANTER" JIM. FINALLY, THE AUTHOR OWES HIS UNDYING GRATITUDE TO ALL OF THE FINE FOLKS OVER AT POLITICALLY INCORRECT GAMES FOR MAKING FORMLESS AVAILABLE TO YOU.



# The Social Contract

Prior to beginning a game using the Formless system, all of the players should participate in the drafting of a *social contract*.

What is a social contract?



There are many different definitions of the term “*Social Contract*” floating around, some of them unnecessarily laden with pseudo-intellectual jargon and others peppered with political buzzwords. Formless attempts to sidestep these potential stumbling blocks and define a social contract in the most basic of terms as they apply to roleplaying games.

A social contract as defined by Formless is an implicit verbal or written agreement made among individuals that results in the defined organization of a game’s premise, setting, and other tenets. That is, a social contract is a mutual agreement drafted by all of the players to adhere to certain rules in regard to given aspects of a game. Below is an example of a typical social contract as defined by Formless.

*Rachel, Jon, and Ben are preparing to play a game based in ancient Greece. They all agree beforehand that they want the game to focus on soldiers, do not wish the Gods to be anything more than idealistic theory, and want to stay as true to historical Greece as possible (as opposed to mythic Greece).*

In this example, the players have drafted a simple social contract that restricts their characters to being soldiers, expressly forbids the appearance of Gods as physical entities, and suggests the exclusion of larger than life heroics.

This example is, of course, only one of many possible variations of the social contract as it is defined herein. Depending upon the preferences of individual players, many other aspects of a game may need to be addressed in a social contract.

When drafting a social contract, the most important thing to remember is that it exists to organize a game according to the wishes of all players who will be participating in said game. As the contract exists to ensure that all players enjoy the game, all players should have an equal say in the drafting process.

While some concessions will undoubtedly be made by individuals during the drafting process, a good rule of thumb to adhere to is that of majority rule. In the interest of promoting fairness, players may want to consider actually voting on individual tenets of a social contract.

One should consider the social contract to be the absolute rule of Formless, for it governs all other rules herein according to the wishes of the players. There is no rule in the whole of Formless that the players may not alter, supplant, or ignore by stipulation of the social contract. The social contract is the one rule by all other rules in Formless should be judged.

Once a social contract has been drafted, however, it is important to remember that it is not set in stone. Social contracts by their very nature are mutable (as well they should be). There may come a time when the players decide that they want to alter the social contract during the course of a game, and this is perfectly acceptable.

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A list of common game aspects addressed by social contracts is presented below. This list is by no means all encompassing, nor is it intended to be. It is simply included as an aid to assist players in drafting their own social contracts, providing them with some insight into the myriad of possible factors that can be encompassed by such agreements.

## 🌀 Genre

- What genre best describes the game that you want to play and what tropes are common to that genre?
- Are all of the players familiar with the chosen genre and its tropes?  
If not, should these elements be explained in more detail for players that are not familiar with them?
- On what elements of the chosen genre will the game focus?
- Will any elements of the chosen genre be implicitly ignored?  
If so, which elements will be ignored?

## 🌀 Setting

- On what elements of the chosen setting will the game focus?
- Will any elements of the chosen setting be expressly ignored?  
If so, which elements will be ignored?
- Will any elements be added to the chosen setting?  
If so, which elements will be added?

## 🌀 Tone

- What tone will be the established standard for the game?
- Will the game be entirely serious or entirely humorous?
  - If serious, will the game allow for any humor at all?
  - If humorous, will the game allow for moments of serious drama?

## 🌀 Character Power

- Will characters be individual people, entire cultures, or physical objects?
- Will characters be represented as average examples of their type or will they be represented as extremely powerful?
- Will characters have a better than average chance of success when attempting to perform a given action?

## 🌀 Rules

- Will optional rules be implemented?  
If so, which ones?
- Will the game use the rules as written, or will it allow modifications to the rules?  
If modifications are made to the rules, what will they be?

# Characters

A character is the most important tool that a player has available to him when it comes to telling stories and weaving legends.



A character is the lens through which players view the fictional worlds of roleplaying games and the vessel through which they influence these same worlds. There are three types of characters based upon models native to written literature, as defined by Formless (*see below*).

It is important to remember that in a game, a given character may merely appear to be of a given character type. That is, the nameless bartender may, in fact, be the watchful henchman of the primary antagonist (or if you are especially devious, they may be the primary antagonist in disguise).

In a Formless game, all characters, regardless of type, are initially defined by a story. This story may be anything ranging from a few sentences to several pages worth of descriptive text. The exact nature of a story used to define a character is limited only by the stipulations laid down by the social contract, while a story's length is determined by the type of character for which it is being written. As a general

rule, the more important that a given character is to a game, the longer and more descriptive his story will be.

When writing a character's story, players should pay special attention to the stipulations laid down by the social contract, doing their best to adhere to them. There's no need to go over the character stories with a fine-toothed comb or anything, as the flexible nature of the social contract makes dealing with inconsistencies on the fly fairly painless. A game will flow more smoothly if as many pitfalls as possible are addressed prior to actual play however.

Once a player has written a story to define his character (or characters), he should closely examine it. Any character aspects that were specifically stated and/or implied in the story, should be noted separately (*see the examples at the end of this book*). These aspects of a character will play a vital part in conflict resolution, as outlined in the following section of the rules.

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## Principal Characters

Principal Characters are those characters who play pivotal roles in a given game. Principal Characters are what any given game revolves around, the characters whose actions serve as the primary focus of said game. In Formless games, the protagonists and the primary antagonist(s) are considered to be Principal Characters.

## Supporting Characters

Supporting Characters are those characters who support the roles of Principal Characters by virtue of providing them external definition, but whom the events of a given game do not center upon directly. An arch-villain's second in command is a good example of a Supporting Character, as are a protagonist's family members.

## Incidental Characters

Incidental Characters are characters who exist purely as window dressing for a given locale. Common examples of Incidental Characters include an arch-villain's league of nameless henchmen, the staff of a roadside tavern, and the unassuming pedestrians in any given urban metropolis.

# Conflict & Resolution

Formless defines conflict as any opposition between characters or forces that motivates the progression of the story being told.



There are two primary classifications of conflict in Formless: *internal* and *external*.

## Internal Conflict

Internal conflict takes place within a given character. It is not a tangible or visible opposition, but rather an opposition with one's own feelings or emotions. Internal conflict can be further defined as *Man versus Self*, thus named because the conflict takes place within an individual's mind.

## External Conflict

External conflict takes place between a given character and an external force. It is a tangible and visible opposition, rather than an internal struggle. External conflict can be broken down into *Man versus Man* and *Man versus Environment*.

In the *Man versus Man* classification of external conflict, characters find themselves in direct opposition with other characters or entities.

In the *Man versus Environment* classification of external conflict, characters find themselves in direct opposition with elements of their environment, such as societal standards or nature itself.

Whenever a character finds himself in the midst of a conflict, the outcome of said conflict must be resolved. Conflict resolution answers two questions, the first of which is:

*Will the character prevail over the force he is pitted against, or will the opposing force take the upper hand?*

There are several ways to answer this question, among them the rolling of dice, but the default method of answering this question in Formless is simply to examine the conflict and apply common sense to determine the outcome. In the event that a conflict requires a certain outcome in order for the story to progress past that point, that outcome should be applied. For example:

*While traveling across the Sahara Desert, our heroes find themselves the victims of a sudden sandstorm. Ill prepared to deal with such a potentially fatal disaster, they dig into the side of a sand dune behind their camels and hope for the best.*

Naturally, if the protagonists in the above example are killed due to exposure, the story won't progress any further (barring a trip to the Underworld if that is part of the social contract). In this instance, the outcome of the conflict should favor the characters, making it possible for the story to progress past the point of the conflict. Alternately, if



entrance to the Underworld is the next desired step in story progression, then the outcome of the conflict should favor the sandstorm.

Should no specific outcome of a given conflict be required for the story to progress past that point, the next criterion for determining the outcome of a conflict is a simple matter of weighing a character's competency and means against the force which opposes him. For example:

*Rushing down the alley toward the frantic cries for help, Ivy finds her route blocked by a padlocked gate. She decides to shoot the padlock off of the gate with her snub-nosed revolver, while rushing towards it.*

Whether or not the character opens the gate, the story will progress, so there is now only a question as to how the story will progress based on the outcome of the conflict. In this case, the character in question is Ivy Ford, a *Principal Character*. Her list of specifically stated and implied character aspects (see page 11) tells us that Ivy owns a snub-nosed revolver and is assumed to have some level of skill where using it is concerned.

Examining the conflict, it is a simple matter to weigh the character's competency and means (skill with a pistol and the pistol itself, respectively) against the force that opposes them (a padlock). In this case, the character is obviously more than a match for the force that opposes her, thus the outcome of the conflict should favor the character.

Sometimes, however, determining the outcome of a given conflict will not be as clear-cut as it was in the previous two examples. This is especially true of *Man versus Man* conflicts, in which the competency and means of two different characters must be weighed against one another. For example:

*Gregor has squared off against a member of a rival Antiquarian Order in single combat to decide which of their employers will be granted land rights to the Tomb of Falhandril. The fight will be to first blood, and the prize is the land rights to the tomb.*

Whether or not Gregor triumphs over his adversary in single combat, the story will progress, so again we are left with only the question of how the story will progress based on the outcome of the conflict. In this instance, Gregor Storch, a *Supporting Character*, is pitted against a nameless member of a rival Antiquarian Order. For the purposes of this example, Gregor's opponent is an *Incidental Character*, who has the following specifically stated aspects:

1. The character's proper name is not given.
2. The character is an Antiquarian.
3. The character has some combat training.

The list of Gregor's specifically stated and implied aspects (see page 12) tells us that Gregor is a seasoned combat veteran and is assumed to have been operating as an Antiquarian for quite some time. Comparing the aspects of both characters, it can be reasonably assumed that Gregor has the upper hand, thus the outcome of the conflict should favor Gregor.

When an instance of conflict occurs in which both sides seem to be equally matched, there is one final element to consider when determining the outcome of said conflict—the entertainment factor. Of the possible outcomes, which would be the most entertaining for the players? Weigh the possible outcomes carefully and then choose that which would entertain the players most. As simple as this sounds, remember that when using Formless, games are about having fun and not worrying about the proper mathematical formulas for simulating reality.

Once the basic outcome of a conflict has been determined, the magnitude of that outcome needs to be determined, which brings us to the second question answered by conflict resolution:

***If a character prevails over the opposing force, how great is his victory? Likewise, if a character fails to overcome the opposing force, how bitter is his defeat?***

When determining the magnitude of a given outcome, the only factor that bears consideration is that of entertainment. Again, of all the possible magnitudes that the outcome of a given conflict could embody, which would most entertain the players? To better illustrate this point, which of the following magnitudes of resolution sounds more entertaining?

*Ivy fires her gun at the padlock on the gate in front of her, and destroys it.*

Or...

*Ivy shoots the padlock on the gate in front of her and it explodes in a shower of sparks, the impact of her shot jarring the gate open in the process.*

As a general rule, the more entertaining the magnitude of an outcome, the better. That said, entertaining is not necessarily synonymous with over the top—should Formless be utilized to run a game of esoteric horror, a magnitude of



success that allows a character to pull off some fancy gun-fu maneuvers and smite the Unnameable One in a hail of bullets will almost certainly diminish the entertainment value of the game. There's a time and place for everything. A serious story, for example, can usually give way to moments of comedy, but humor used in excess would almost certainly ruin the feel of a powerful drama.

Players familiar with the conventions of a given genre, in a game billed as adhering to those conventions, and therefore expecting those conventions will be far more entertained by an outcome that honors them as opposed to one that gleefully ignores them. Not all players and settings concern themselves with the intricacies of genre, of course, and for said settings and players these considerations won't be an issue. Please note that you shouldn't automatically assume that your fellow players or chosen setting fall into this category—take the time to find out for certain.

## Damage, Death and Destruction

Damage, death, and destruction in all of their forms are encompassed by the rules for conflict resolution. These conditions are merely different magnitudes of outcome, as presented above. Determining whether a character, creature, or object is damaged, killed, or destroyed is done in exactly the same manner as the magnitude of any other conflict outcome—fatigue, injury, damage, insanity, and the like can all be gained by characters to suit the outcome of events. As with all things in Formless, these conditions need not be quantified, but described in loose descriptive terms. For example, a fall from a roof may inflict a few cuts and bruises, or even a broken leg or arm. This amount of detail is sufficient, but should also be taken into consideration in future conflicts—a broken leg can hamper one's ability to run or someone who has been laboring all day may have trouble staying awake late at night.

A player whose character is killed or otherwise permanently disabled (such as being driven insane), as the result of being trapped in an utterly lethal situation and having a conflict favor their opposition, gets to narrate their character's demise. This gives the players a chance to terminate their creations on their own terms, embellishing as little or as much as they'd like (the more entertaining, the better, of course).

## Adjudication

These rules present the question of who should resolve conflict—the players as a group or a sole arbitrator appointed by the players in the group?

Where adjudication of conflict resolution is concerned, the option you choose to enact has the potential to impact a game greatly. Many players will find that the decision to appoint a single individual as a referee can make a game that utilizes the principles laid out in Formless feel very much like a traditional table-top roleplaying game. Conversely, players who choose to handle the adjudication of conflict resolution as a group will often find that the resulting experience is quite alien. Players are encouraged to experiment with both of these options until they determine which one is right for them.

As mentioned in the introduction, Formless is a collaborative roleplaying game by default—it splits the usual responsibility of a sole referee among all of the players. There isn't a set mechanic which facilitates this division of power, as the inclusion of such a mechanic would run contrary to the design goals of Formless. Instead, this division of power is handled by way of simple social discourse between the players in adherence with the tenets of the game as laid down in the social contract. This isn't to say that a game which utilizes Formless can't be run by a designated referee, only that by default, it isn't.

If the players feel as though their entertainment needs would be better served by appointing a single individual to arbitrate the action in a game, this is perfectly acceptable and may be incorporated into the social contract. If this option is enacted, the designated referee will be responsible for adjudicating all conflict resolution, using the rules discussed in this document and the players must be willing to accept any judgement rendered by the appointed referee as final. This is where the level of trust mentioned in the introduction comes heavily into play.

In the end, there is no *right* way to implement the adjudication of conflict resolution in Formless, nor do these rules attempt to define such a method. What it ultimately boils down to is choosing a method of implementing adjudication that affords all of the players as much comfort and entertainment as possible. This is a technique which must be molded for each particular group of players.

# Character Growth

The development of characters is a logical outgrowth of telling stories. Over the course of any given story, characters are altered by their experiences and interaction in and with the world around them. In this respect, characters in a story are not so different from real people—they may experience pain, sorrow, happiness, love, greed, and every other emotion that real people are capable of feeling.

The growth and development of characters in a game that utilizes Formless is charted by way of chronicling the experiences of those characters in a journal, not unlike many real people chronicle their own experiences in journals or diaries. This journal may be a notebook, a series of index cards, or even a web log—whatever form the journal takes, its purpose and function remain unchanged.

The first entry in a character's journal should be their story (as discussed earlier in these rules), with subsequent entries expanding this story and further defining the character according to the action that took place in a given game session. Whether or not a character's aspects are presented in the journal or in a separate log is entirely up to the player, though they do need to be kept track of someplace.

After each game session, players may recap the events of that session with a journal entry. This entry may be as short as the players wish, but should not exceed a length of five paragraphs. Additionally, each such entry should be dated twice—once with a date that corresponds to the chronological calendar of the game setting and once with a date that corresponds with our own chronological calendar. These dates are referred to as *in-game* and *out-of-game* dates respectively.

Finally, once a journal entry has been written, the player should carefully examine it, making note of any implicit or implied character aspects mentioned, much as was done when writing the character's initial story.

# Going Formless

Formless is an ideology that can be grafted onto other published roleplaying games and systems.



Formless is perfect for turning just about any system into a collaborative roleplaying experience. No director (or whatever term you prefer to use for the gamemaster) is needed as players share the responsibilities created by the social contract.

System elements which encourage character growth and personality, such as experience or gimmicks (also called merits, flaws, advantages, personality traits, etc.), should be more than just numbers or generic descriptions. They add considerable *flavor* and work best when written into a character's story. This not only ensures that a rich persona is described, but also maintains consistency between the Formless methodology and that of the original system.

Players create characters as normal, but all interaction not involving *man versus man* conflict should be narrative-based as described by Formless. Since a character's talents, training, personality, and background are typically defined when he is created, it is a relatively simple process of determining what he is capable of accomplishing in *man versus self* and *man versus environment* conflicts.

When *man versus man* conflict occurs or a more structured approach to resolving the outcome is desired, the original system's methodology comes into play. If a conflict occurs between two players' characters, it can be resolved by using the original system's method for determining the outcome of

contested tasks (sometimes referred to as resisted or opposed tasks). In other words, perform a task (roll dice, allocate resources, etc.) which is meant to resolve a contest between two or more opponents as described in the original system.

It may also be necessary to perform tasks for questionable actions, such as unusual stunts, or those involving elements best kept secret from the players involved (an opponent's abilities, for example). For cases such as these, any one player not involved in the conflict may temporarily assume the role of director. In essence, he will determine all factors required for the task—difficulty, environmental conditions, risks, modifiers, and finally, the outcome. Once the conflict has been resolved or has abated, all players are once again on equal footing as it were, continuing with their Formless narrative.

## Over the Top Action

There may times when *over the top action*, or *high cinematics*, is the focus of a game. This would make most *man versus environment* conflicts of the questionable kind, requiring a lot of dice rolling or resource allocation (or whatever the method of task resolution is for the game system in use). Since such procedures can stop the flow of storytelling and create excessive structure when Formless encourages just the opposite, an alternate method of resolution is recommended.

Questionable actions are both subjective and dynamic. Their subjectivity is based on the perceived abilities of the character by the other players. The dynamic aspect relates to changes in environment, the character's status and health, and the nature of the story. Just as a character has the capability to succeed at a task, other factors may also aid or diminish the character's ability. Smoke reduces vision, noise hampers concentration, and zero-gravity increases the amount of weight which may be lifted, for example.

Put simply, if the other players accept the character's actions as a reality based on all factors (ability, environmental, and story) it occurs as envisioned. On the other hand, if they cannot reconcile the player's vision for his character's performance, the questionable action is not possible and the attempt fails. A simple way of deciding this is for all players, save for the one whose character's actions are in question, to vote. Because all players are meant to enjoy themselves, a unanimous decision is required for the action to succeed.

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## Adapting Specific Systems to Formless

The following addendum to these guidelines describe recommendations for adapting specific systems to Formless.

### ☞ Active Exploits Diceless Roleplaying

There are a number of ways to customize your use of Active Exploits to foster a Formless style of play. For those who wish to avoid numbers as much as possible, focus on the *Live Exploits* rules, which requires only abilities and fields of expertise, although convictions and gimmicks may also be used. Otherwise, feel free to use the *Basic* or *Advanced Exploits* rules, or any desired combination of elements.

Some useful tips for resolving questionable actions during the narrative can be found in the *Raw Ability Tasks* or *Outcome Without Tasks* sections on page 67 of the Active Exploits core rules. *Quick and Dirty Combat* (page 71 of Active Exploits v.1.1) greatly simplifies *man versus man* conflict, and *Quick and Dirty Extras* (page 70) speeds up the process of both creating *incidental characters* and involving them in conflict.

Convictions and threads are strong *flavor* elements for characters. Ideally, *man versus self* conflict resulting from convictions should be resolved narratively. This is true whether using the Formless framework or Active Exploits by itself.

### ☞ genreDiverson i

As with the other systems, this requires only a simple alteration to your playing style. When using the *Basic Task Resolution* rules, they need only be called into play for *man versus man* conflict or questionable actions. All other conflicts should be resolved using the Formless methodology. Advanced Task Resolution is a little more robust and offers additional structure for *man versus man* and *man versus self* conflict in the form of *Contested* and *Composure Tasks* respectively. In addition, *Automatic Tasks* provide insight useful in determining the outcome of *man versus environment* conflicts. The Extras rules also work well with *incidental characters* and resolving conflicts between them and *principal* or *supporting characters*.

### ☞ Impresa Express

Using Formless with Impresa Express is pretty straight forward. Most conflicts can be resolved using the *Automatic Tasks* rules. Some conflicts require more precision, however. This includes *man versus self* conflict, which is best resolved using the *Composure Tasks* rules, and *man versus man* conflict which should rely on *Contested* or *Resisted Tasks*. As presented earlier, questionable tasks should be handled as per the normal Impresa Express rules.

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## Other Ideas?

Feel free to post your own adaptations for other systems as well as new ways of working with Formless at the Politically Incorrect Games Collaborative (<http://www.pigames.net/collaborative/>) and forums (<http://www.pigames.net/forum/>).

# Exploring Formless

To better aid your perceptions of Formless, we have included a selection of sample social contracts, characters, and sessions.



## Social Contracts

The following examples outline social contracts for games utilizing Formless.

### 🌀 Social Contract 1: Dark Alleys

The game hereafter known as **Dark Alleys** will combine elements of both hard-boiled detective fiction and supernatural horror, though the primary focus should remain on the hard-boiled elements. The players will cooperatively tell a story that centers on the **principal character** of **Ivy Ford**; each player taking turns adding narrative to the story with play proceeding around the table in a clockwise motion, beginning with **Rachel**. Turns shall consist of a player adding a line or two of narrative to the story, possibly a bit more if all parties agree, though dragging out narrative to hog the spotlight is not allowed. Finally, although it may be genre appropriate, no lengthy internal monologues shall be allowed. Conflicts shall be resolved via the **default Formless rules**, though players are encouraged to set up conflicts for other players.

### 🌀 Social Contract 2: Reclamation

The game hereafter referred to as **Reclamation** takes place at the dawn of Earth's Second Aeon, following the decline of humanity and the subsequent war that scorched the surface of their planet. **Chad** is designated as the **Referee**, while **Herman** and **Harry** will assume the roles of two **principal characters** per the conventions of a **traditional table-top roleplaying game**. These principal characters find themselves in the Northern Wastes on a mission to reclaim a religious artifact of Earth's First Aeon for their liege, Lord Griffon. Accompanying these two principle characters is a **supporting character** named **Gregor Storch** who has been hired by their liege in the capacity of a guide. The flow of character actions and dialogue shall be governed only by narrative, and conflicts shall be resolved using the **standard Formless rules**.



# Characters

The following examples for each of the three types of characters illustrates the use of stories and their implied aspects.

## 🔗 **Principal Character: Ivy Ford**

*Ivy Ford has made a career out of looking for trouble. She has been mesmerized by stories of intrepid private investigators ever since she was a little girl, and now, twenty six years later, she is one.*

*Operating out of a small office front in Santa Monica, Ivy has yet to make a name for herself as a private investigator. In fact, her dream job is nothing like she had expected it to be.*

*Although Ivy has the looks of a street-tough private investigator, from the rumpled trench coat and battered fedora to the snub-nosed revolver and the square jaw, she has spent the last several months chasing debt dodgers and deadbeat husbands.*

*Something has to give soon, and Ivy is afraid that it might be her. Every night she prays that a case like those she read about as a little girl would come her way, jarring her out of depression.*

After reading this story, one is immediately able to ascertain the following facts about Ivy Ford:

1. The character's name is Ivy Ford.
2. Ivy enjoyed stories of intrepid private investigators as a child.
3. Ivy is at least twenty-six years old.
4. Ivy is a private investigator.
5. Ivy works out of a small office located in Santa Monica.
6. Ivy wears a rumpled trench coat, battered fedora, and has a square jaw.
7. Ivy carries a gun, specifically a snub-nosed revolver.
8. Ivy has spent the last several months chasing debt dodgers and deadbeat husbands.
9. Ivy is under pressure and is afraid that she might break if something doesn't change soon.
10. Ivy is hoping that an interesting case will come along and jar her out of depression.

As the example of Ivy Ford illustrates, even a short series of paragraphs can relay an incredible amount of information about a character. Further, the ten items that are listed above are only the aspects of the character specifically mentioned in the story—there are a number of other aspects that are implied by the story, though never specifically stated, as outlined below.

1. Ivy most likely possesses some skill with revolvers, as she carries one.
2. Ivy must be a somewhat skilled private investigator, as the story indicates that she has handled multiple cases.
3. Ivy most likely possesses some college education, as she is at least twenty-six years of age.
4. Ivy might be considered a daydreamer by some, as she has a very romanticized notion of being a private investigator.

While these implied aspects of a character are not certainties or quantifiable fact, they are useful considerations for players to weigh when describing a character's interactions with the world around them. Indeed, these implied character aspects could very well mean the difference between a character's success or failure in a given situation, making them just as important as specifically stated character aspects.



## 🌀 Supporting Character: Gregor Storch

*Gregor Storch is an Antiquarian of the fourth magnitude, currently employed by House Gale in a reclamation capacity.*

*Gregor's current employers have dispatched him to the distant Northern Wastes in order to assist the Principal Characters in searching out a religious artifact of the second aeon thought to be entombed in that vicinity of the world.*

*Gregor is a seasoned combat veteran and knowledgeable archaeologist in addition to having an intimate familiarity with the lands of the Northern Wastes.*

This story specifically conveys the following facts about this character:

1. The character's name is Gregor Storch.
2. Gregor is an Antiquarian of the fourth magnitude.
3. Gregor is currently employed by House Gale.
4. Gregor has been sent to the Northern Wastes.
5. Gregor is assisting the principal characters in searching for a religious artifact of Earth's second aeon.
6. Gregor is a seasoned combat veteran.
7. Gregor is a knowledgeable archaeologist.
8. Gregor has intimate familiarity with the lands of the Northern Wastes.

Despite being more impersonal than the story of Ivy Ford, this story has still provided us with numerous specific aspects of Gregor Storch's character. Likewise, this character story also implies certain aspects of Gregor Storch.

1. Gregor most likely has extensive past experience involving the reclamation of artifacts, given that he has been hired by House Gale to assist the Principal Characters in performing this exact task.
2. Gregor has most likely been an Antiquarian for some time, given that he possesses what appears to be a rank of fourth magnitude.

While these implied aspects of a character are not certainties or quantifiable fact, they are useful considerations for players to weigh when describing their character's interactions with the world around them. Indeed, these implied character aspects could very well mean the difference between a character's success or failure in a given situation, making them just as important as specifically stated character aspects.

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## 🌀 Incidental Character: Unnamed Lackeys

*The lackeys of Doctor Hans Spiegel wear orange jumpsuits and blindly follow the Doctor's every command.*

While this story does not disclose a large amount of detailed information, it does convey all of the necessary information to define unnamed lackeys in a game.

1. The characters' proper names are not given.
2. The characters wear orange jumpsuits.
3. The characters blindly obey Doctor Hans Spiegel.

## 🌀 Incidental Character: Imperial Marines

*The Empire's marines are called in to board hostile spacecraft and perform rescue mission on vessels with failing life support systems.*

Again, this story does not convey a large amount of detailed information about individual marines, but we can assume the following:

1. The characters' proper names are not given.
2. The characters are trained to operate in space as well as lifeless, zero-gravity environments.
3. The characters are in the service of the Empire.

## 🌀 Example of Play 1

This first example of play represents an excerpt from a game in which conflict is resolved by the group as whole, rather than by a single designated referee. The players have decided to cooperatively share control of characters and take turns adding narrative to the story, with play proceeding in a clockwise direction around the table, starting with Rachel.

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**Rachel:** *As Ivy rushes down the alley toward the frantic cries for help, she sees that her path is blocked by a pad locked gate.*

**Richard:** *That's a conflict, right?*

**Elizabeth:** *Right.*

**Rachel:** *Yep . A definite conflict.*

**Richard:** *Okay. Seeing that her path is blocked and that time is of the essence, Ivy draws her snubnosed .38 and fires three shots at the padlock.*

**Rachel:** *I think that's probably sufficient to destroy a padlock. After all, she's no stranger to using a pistol.*

**Elizabeth:** *Well, it's my turn but, luckily, I agree. Ivy shoots the padlock on the gate in front of her and it explodes in a shower of sparks, the impact of her shot jarring the gate open in the process!*

**Richard:** *Great narrative, Liz!*

**Elizabeth:** *[SMILING] Thanks!*

**Rachel:** *With her pistol drawn, Ivy kicks in the gate and surveys her surroundings. It sounds as though the cries are coming from a window above her.*

**Richard:** *Oh, damn that's tricky. Wait, wait! I have it—as Ivy glances to her left she sees a fire escape ladder that looks as though it hasn't been used in quite some time.*

**Elizabeth:** *I see a potential opportunity for conflict here. Hmm... Ivy holsters her revolver and gives the rusty ladder a good shake. It seems like the ladder has seen better days, but it should support her weight.*

**Rachel:** *I'm not so sure, Liz.*

**Elizabeth:** *Well, it's your turn—you tell us.*

**Richard:** *I'm indifferent, either way you swing it is cool with me.*

**Rachel:** *Right. Ivy grabs the rusty ladder and begins to climb. As she moves up the ladder, the fire escape rattles and sways slightly from side to side. Richard...*

**Richard:** *Check this out! From above her, the cries are suddenly cut short by three gunshots. Without warning, a pane of glass explodes outward above Ivy and a dark shape jumps through it on to the fire escape!*

**Elizabeth:** *Wow! If there wasn't a conflict earlier, there certainly is one now!*

**Richard:** *[GIGGLES] I know.*

**Elizabeth:** *The already rickety fire escape heaves under the additional weight, and begins to tear away from the side of the building. If Ivy doesn't move quickly, she's going to have some problems!*

**Rachel:** *Crap! Uh... let me think... okay, I think I have something. The shape above Ivy stands silhouetted in the moonlight for only a moment before it leaps high into the air, landing with a resounding thud in the alley below.*

**Richard:** *What the hell is that thing?!?*

**Elizabeth:** *Is that your narration, or are you asking that out of character?*

**Richard:** *Both! What the hell is that thing?!?*

**Rachel:** *[SMILING] Well, we did agree on including supernatural elements when we drafted the social contract.*

**Elizabeth:** *That's right, we did. Hanging from the fire escape, Ivy briefly locks eyes with the man-thing on the ground below her. She senses a malign presence unlike anything she has ever felt before, and immediately knows that she's out of her depth on this one.*

**Rachel:** *Hmm... with a snarl, the man-thing extends a monstrous finger toward Ivy and growls something awful before disappearing into the shadows. It growls her name.*

## Example of Play 2

This second example of play represents an excerpt from a game that utilizes a single appointed referee for adjudicating conflict, providing story elements, and assuming the role of characters in the setting aside from those protagonists controlled by the other players. The players here have decided to recreate the feel of a traditional table-top roleplaying game. While using the mechanics of their favorite system using dice would greatly enhance the *traditional* feel, they have decided to stick with just the Formless rules for this session.

Referee	Chad	Saduk Mar (principal character)	Harry
Gregor Storch (supporting character)	Chad	Thol Malum (principal character)	Herman

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**Chad:** Well, it looks like there's one hell of a sandstorm building to the North. Gregor motions for the rest of you to stop, and dismounts his rover.

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] What is it, Gregor? We can't afford any delays, you know—our competition has at least two days on us.

**Herman:** [AS THOL] Hold, Saduk. I think it best not to upset our companion. Lord Griffon obviously trusted him enough to commission his services.

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it, Malum. Right now my primary concern is reaching the tomb before Lord Thrice's people do.

**Chad:** [AS GREGOR] Sandstorm. One day to the North. It'll hit us tomorrow evening at the rate we're moving now—and it's probably on top of Thrice's hacks as we speak.

**Herman:** [AS THOL] Well, what did I tell you, Saduk? I'd say everything is well in hand.

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] I'm not one to take a 'probably' for granted. I didn't get where I am today by making assumptions.

**Chad:** [AS GREGOR] Wise man.

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] And, you! Your status as an Antiquarian might endear you to fools such as Griffon, but to me you're no less a relic of times gone by than the artifact that we've been sent to recover. Remember that!

**Chad:** [AS GREGOR] Bedouins two clicks to the North. Coming in fast. Something has them running scared—not the storm.

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] What did that villager say last night?

**Chad:** [AS GREGOR] Under the sand! Beisere!

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] Don't be ridiculous! The beisere are a legend to frighten children!

**Chad:** You can see the bedouin now. They certainly seem to be moving fast.

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] I ready my rifle.

**Chad:** [AS GREGOR; PANICKED] Dismount! On the camels we have no chance! Dismount and run! Follow me! To the rocks!

**Herman:** I'm following the Antiquarian to the rocks!

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] Cowards! It's only a handful of nomads!

**Herman:** [AS THOL] Dismount, Saduk!

**Harry:** I'm taking aim at the bedouins. Can I get a clear shot?

**Chad:** Easily. They seem to be riding directly toward you, in fact, their rover is kicking up sand as they go.

**Harry:** Fantastic! I fire at the lead rider!

**Chad:** You see the bedouin at the front of the group drop from his rover and fall into the sand.

**Chad:** [AS GREGOR] Dismount, fool! Dismount!

**Harry:** I ignore the bastard and keep firing.

**Chad:** Okay, you easily drop two more bedouins.

**Harry:** [AS SADUK] Ha! They drop like flies before my bullets!

**Chad:** As the remaining three bedouins crest a dune roughly eight-hundred yards out, you all see a gargantuan worm burst forth from the sand and devour one of them. It must be nearly one-hundred feet long!

**Harry:** A what?!?

**Chad:** [AS GREGOR] Beisere! Off your mount if you wish to live, soldier! Off your mount and to the rocks!

**Harry:** Well, screw this! I drop my rifle and I run!



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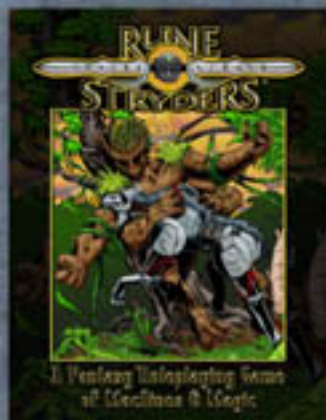
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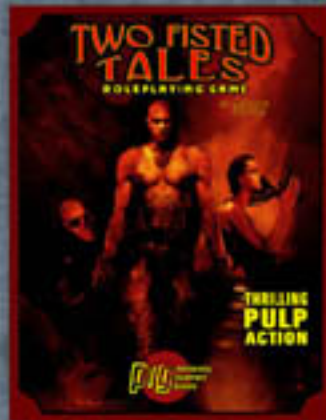
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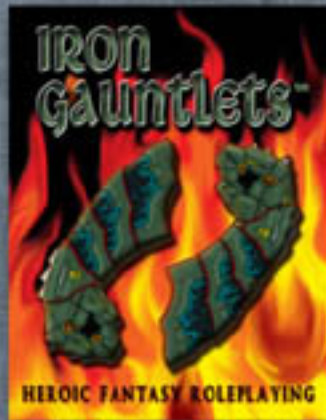
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