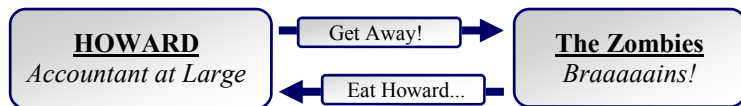


microcosm

WHAT IS THIS?

It's a roleplaying game. In this kind of game, players take on different roles in a fictitious situation. One of those players takes on the role of the situation itself; these rules refer to this player as the Guide. Rather than trying to explain this in detail, just imagine that we're sitting at a table, and I say to you "So, you're some guy working in an office job, and zombies bust down the door. What do you do?" - and you respond "Well, I guess I grab something to use as a weapon and make for the door, bashing as I go"; I think about it, and tell you a couple of possible weapons in the office, and you pick one, and start bashing away; and we're playing. I'm the Guide, and you're the player. You've already got a fictional role (some guy working in an office job), and we've got us a situation that works, one where you have a goal, some obstacles, stuff like that. So far, easy.



Now, I don't know if your office guy can bash his way out the door, so I get you to describe him a bit more, and we figure some way of resolving it so we don't end up bickering. We'll probably bias things in your favor if your office guy is good at bashing stuff and running generally, or against him if he's bad at it. We'll probably stack things a little to help office guy regardless, because he's the focus of the game. In the interests of being fair, we'll try to codify how we did it this time so that we can keep it in mind for the next time that he has to bash some stuff; it's good to be consistent.

That's the basics. As you might expect, there are plenty of details - a simple situation like the office won't last us long, and building more involved ones is a bit of a trick, but one that can be managed easily enough. Having 'who the characters are' and 'if others are helping' matter to the situation and the way that things come out gets some attention, as do methods for keeping everyone interested and engaged in the game at hand. Separating the jobs at the table, so that everyone knows who is in charge of this thing or that one, and bickering is kept out of play, is discussed. But all of that is *detail*; if you've read up to this point, you already understand how the process works.

HOW TO GET STARTED

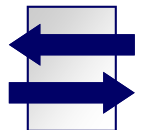
1. People, Place, Props: You'll need at least two people; one will take on the job of being the Guide; the others are players. You'll need somewhere to play that is fairly free of interruptions. And you'll need a total of ten tokens (buttons, poker chips, pennies, glass beads, whatever) per person, player or Guide, and some way of keeping notes (usually, pencil and paper). It's nice to have a shallow bowl in the middle to toss tokens into and pull from, but not required.



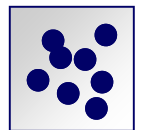
2. First Thought: You'll need an inspiration for the game. "Let's have a game about assassins!" is a first thought. "How about we play out a fantasy like *Lord of the Rings*?" is, too. Find something the whole group likes and knows - if someone didn't see or read *Lord of the Rings*, don't try to teach it; get everyone onboard. If you stall out, everyone can name a book, movie, or TV series, that they enjoy, and find something there to use as the basis of the game. Agree on a style - action, comedy, tragedy, whatever suits.



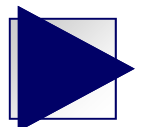
3. Situation: Setting up the situation and the various roles that the players will be taking on is a process of brainstorming and fitting things together. The whole group takes part in this process, as described next page; when it's done, the players will pick characters, and the Guide will 'take possession' of all the rest of it.



4. Tokens: At the start of game, each person at the table should hold seven tokens in-hand, and each should put three *more* tokens in the center of the playing space. Tokens are used for quite a few things we'll get to later; they are the 'currency' of the game. Someone should know how tokens work before play starts.



5. Play: Once the Guide has the situation in-hand, the players have characters, and everyone has their stack of seven tokens, the group can get down to the business of actually playing. Play lasts until the group needs a break (you can come back to it later), or the situation is resolved, and the story is done, in the opinion of the group.



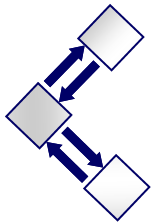
BUILDING SITUATION

Situation building follows these steps. It may take a couple of tries to create a situation worth playing, unless the players are all experienced at this kind of thing, but it's quick enough that this should be easy.



1. The Guide describes a simple conflict

This should be some kind of struggle between two people or groups. These might be anything that fits the first thought of the game. The guide notes these two down on a piece of paper, and notes the conflict between them, usually putting each in a box with an arrow to the other, and writing each one's motives along 'their' arrow.



2. Going clockwise, everyone adds to this.

In turn, each player describes another character or group, and describes their relationships with two or three of those already noted. Good additions are those that...

- **Fit the first thought:** *The first thought is the basic premise, and usually implies a genre, some kinds of action, and so on. Everything added should fit that.*
- **Have a quick summary:** *Each added person or group should have a byline that summarizes it - instead of just adding "Joe", you might add "Joe, Folk Musician".*
- **Want something:** *At least one of the relationships that each person or group has should describe, or at least imply, something they want from the situation.*
- **Raise the tension:** *Each addition should make the conflict the Guide created more tense, complicated, and usually harder to resolve.*



3. On the Guide's turn, they can end it.

Each time it's the Guide's turn to add to the situation, they can end the cycle of adding stuff to it, or keep it going, either before or after adding something. They may also declare that only characters, no more groups, may be added. A Guide shouldn't stop the situation building until there's some choice in characters for players.

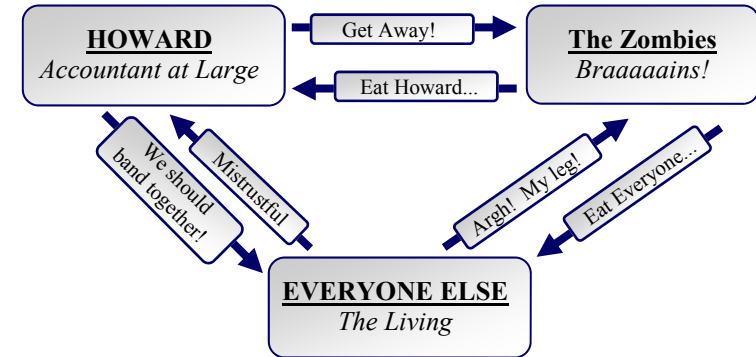


4. When it ends, characters are chosen

When the Guide calls an end to situation building, each player chooses a character in the situation to be *their* character. It's often best if the characters chosen have common goals or enemies, and aren't in direct conflict.

AN ACTION SITUATION:

HOWARD & THE DEAD



THE MAKING OF HOWARD AND THE DEAD

Kim and Levi decide to play a quick pick-up action game, running for maybe an hour or so.

- **Kim lays out a basic conflict:** The Zombies vs. Everyone Else. The Zombies want to eat everyone else. Everyone else is being eaten by the zombies. Simple.
- **Levi adds a character:** Howard, the accountant. Who is trying to get away from the Zombies (that want to eat him), and join up with other living people (who don't trust him).
- **Kim ends it:** No need to add more; this is just going to be playing around with the game, seeing how it works, and being silly.

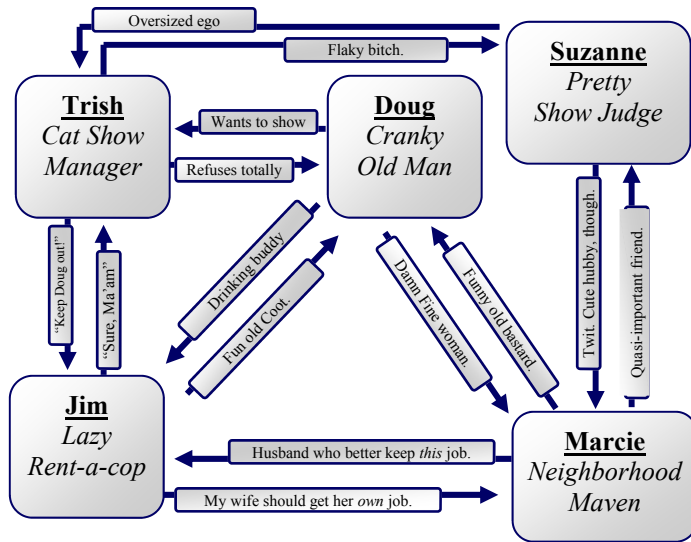
DRAWING OUT THE NETWORKS

A very, very easy way of tracking a situation as it's built is to sketch a 'network' like the one shown above as you go along. For a situation as simplistic as this one, it's not really helpful, but the more complex a situation gets, the more useful it is to track it. While drawing things out in this way isn't required for play, it is strongly recommended.

There are also, as a group gets more practiced, further tricks that can be done with a network that's drawn out in this way. For example, marking down "The Killer" on a network in a mystery game, with the note "is also someone else on the network" is a very visual method of putting a mystery right in front of everyone without giving it away.

A COMEDY SITUATION:

THE CAT SHOW



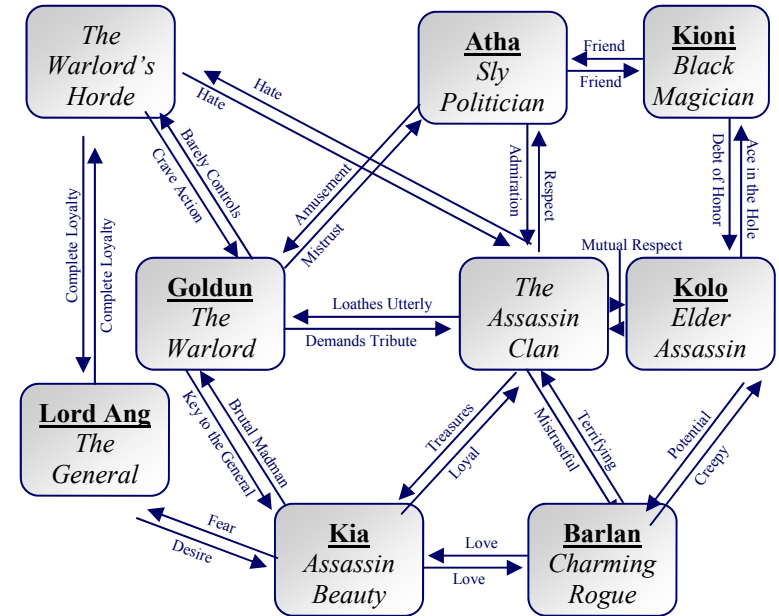
THE MAKING OF THE CAT SHOW

John, Kim, and Laura sit down to create a situation. Kim is the Guide; John and Laura are playing. Their first idea is a suburban comedy about a cat show, full of nasty, backstabbing characters.

- **Kim lays out a basic conflict:** Doug, a cranky old man, wants to show his cat in the cat show. Trish, the cat show manager, refuses to let him do so.
- **John adds:** Jim, the lazy Rent-a-Cop, who has been ordered to keep Doug out of the show, but is also Doug's drinking buddy.
- **Laura adds:** Marcie, the Neighborhood Maven, who is keeping a close eye on her useless husband Jim, but doesn't mind Doug.
- **Kim adds:** Suzanne, the showing judge, who Marcie sucks up to but who only talks to Marcie to get a chance at her husband, and who thinks that Trish is way too high on herself.
- **Kim ends it:** She checks in with the players, and Laura and John, after throwing a few ideas around, decide that they'll go for it, playing Suzanne and Doug.

A FANTASY TRAGEDY

WHISPERING BLADES



THE MAKING OF WHISPERING BLADES

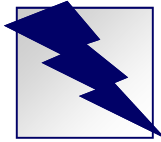
John, Kim, Laura, and Mike have decided they want a high-action sword-and-sorcery tragedy, which is pretty specific stuff. Kim's the Guide again.

- **Kim lays it out:** Goldun, the warlord, who wants to secure power by gaining tribute from the Assassin Clan.
- **John adds:** Kia, the beautiful assassin, who he decides is the tribute that is demanded in order to placate a not-very-loyal general.
- **Laura adds:** The Warlord's horde, which is barely controlled.
- **Mike adds:** Lord Ang, the not-very-loyal general.
- **Kim adds:** Barlan, Kia's true love, but not trusted by her clan.
- **John adds:** Kolo, an elder assassin who is interested in training Barlan, and gaining him clan acceptance.
- **Laura adds:** Atha, a politician scheming against the Warlord from within the Warlord's own camp.
- **Mike adds:** Kioni, friend of Atha, deeply indebted to Kolo for past favors.
- **Kim checks in, and ends it:** Kim asks if everyone can find a character to play from those added; the players pick Kia, Barlan, and Athan, and Kim calls the situation ready, and starts considering options for play.

WHO'S IN CHARGE OF WHAT?

Once play starts, players will direct and play their chosen characters, attempting to fulfill the goals those characters have as the events of the game progresses. The Guide will administrate everything else. In terms of “who’s supposedly in charge”...

- **Players** have authority over what their characters want to do and on what actions those characters will attempt.
- **The Guide** has authority over the setting, situation, and so on, including whether or not the characters succeed at whatever actions are attempted.



HOW “BEING IN CHARGE” ACTUALLY GETS USED

There’s a big difference between being in charge of a thing, and actually using that authority. At a silly extreme, a player couldn’t state that their character sat down without the Guide agreeing that this had happened. The Guide would need to walk with the players through every single action that was taking, checking to make sure that the character *tried* to put on their clothes in the morning.

In real play, players and Guide *often* declare things that someone else is in charge of, simply as a matter of course. It’s when they go further into that territory than is comfortable, or assume something that the person in charge of that thing doesn’t agree with, the person can call them on it - or they can wager, or ask the person declaring things outside their authority to “pay” for it (these are things we’ll get to a little further on). But for the most part, players and Guide contribute things in a steady flow, *concentrating* on their own part without being especially finicky about it.

If someone is pushing the line, you can just tell them “I think you’re pushing”. Let the person doing the describing make their case, or not. People can generally tell when someone’s working the system; when they are, call them on it, talk it out, and fix it. It’s what you need to do in any system; here, it’s just out in the open. More often than not, though, especially with completely new players, the difficulty runs the *other* way. Many new people are hesitant to step out and start pitching ideas and describing actions with confidence. With such players, relax, and be generous in awarding tokens.

THE FLOW OF PLAY

Almost all of the game is played verbally. It’s common for the Guide to describes scenes and characters, speak as characters, and talk with the players about rules and token use. It’s common for players to describe character action, speak ‘in-character’, and discuss the same token uses and rules with one another and the Guide. This breaks down into three basic “modes”:

Describing scenes and action

In this mode, the Guide sets a scene, the players describe what their characters are doing, the Guide states how this affects the scene, telling them what happens next, and back and forth it goes. If the Guide described some ruins, a player might say "I explore the ruins, looking for anything interesting". The Guide might check with the other players to see what they're doing at the same time, and then jump to the first interesting thing in the search, or the first thing that interrupts it. Or the Guide might ask the player what they think is interesting, to tailor the results. So, the Guide is adding new details to the setting all the time; and while they have the original situation to work from, this is the way things are *supposed to be*.



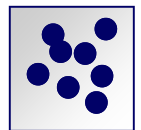
Speaking In-Character

Sessions will include portions where players take on their characters, speaking as if they *were* those characters. These may be lengthy discussions, or quick exchanges of a few words. Moving to this kind of play is easy; if the Guide mentions that Howard runs across a survivor holed up in a corner store, the player might state “Hey, man, any chance I can hole up with you for the night?” as if he were Howard. When someone begins speaking this way, it’s normal to go with it, speaking as the characters. This can end just as naturally, returning to the back-and-forth of description. Smooth changeovers, without any real division, are standard.



Using the rules

Play will also change over to and from speaking as, and for, yourself, when dealing with rules use. Some people will minimize these “breaks”, while others will want to enjoy them in detail. This is, like much else, a matter of style that a group must try to grow into on their own.



SETTING A SCENE

The Guide sets a scene by describing it, pure and simple. This description will start with a basic sketch - the characters are on the rooftops at night, or in a tavern, whatever the case is. It will move on to the most overall sensory impression; by describing the darkness of the night, the noise of the tavern. A few more details of setting, describing the street below or the tables and crowds around them, finish that sketch. After making that sketch, the Guide will almost always go on to add an active element - something that is happening that is there for the characters to interact with, whether that's someone to talk with, enemies to fight, or whatever the case may be.

Presenting scenes is a skill that takes practice; any scene that is worth going into must be interesting in order to appeal to both the players and their characters. Guides should pay attention to this, learning to describe well, and structure descriptions smoothly.

Not all scenes deserve attention. Characters sleep. They eat. They walk down the block. But most of the time, nobody at the table will care how the characters slept, or the details of how much they ate, or other such trivia. Most of this will just be glossed over with "You sleep. You wake. The next day..."

Equally important to the skill of setting a scene well to the Guide is the skill of knowing when to set a scene *at all*. A simple guideline is that a good scene always includes at least one of the following items, and often has the potential for two or more of them:

- *A challenge or conflict of some kind, whether one based on tokens or even simply where there's a choice the Guide thinks the players will want to make as their characters.*
- *Something that they characters ought to know which is important to the current situation.*
- *A chance for the characters to acquire something that they might want, or get closer to achieving a goal.*
- *Something that the Guide knows would be important to one of the players; an event which that specific player can really get into.*

BRIDGING AND PLAYER INITIATIVE

While the Guide describes the changeovers from scene to scene, players will often make it clear through action what the next scene should be - "We go talk to the old man he told us about". Players will also occasionally 'cue' scenes with action; if the Guide is describing the transition with a few details, and a player declares that they want to do something about one of those details, that's a player initiating a scene, and means it's time for the Guide to set it up. Both of these are not only normal, but should be expected.

WAGERING

Token wagering is a way of finding out "what happens next" when it could go different ways. The Guide will call for a wager when there's a conflict that could go either way - a fight, an attempt to climb a cliff, to ruin each other's reputation. Players can also call for wagers when they think things could go either way. How it works:

- **The Call:** The Guide, hearing an action declared, declares that the outcome of the action will depend on a wager.
- **Set Stakes:** The Guide and players decide what will happen if the player wins the wager, and what will happen if they lose it. It is *essential* that this be clear. If a character is trying to crack a safe to get the dirt on an enemy, and the Guide thinks the wager is on whether or not the character can open the safe (containing nothing) *before the guards arrive*, but the player believes that the wager is on whether they *get the dirt*, then there are crossed wires. Be clear.
- **Concept, Difficulty:** If the action being resolved is something that the character ought to be good at according to their one-line description (Doug from the Cat Show is a "Cranky Old Man", and would be good at cranky-old-man things) then that must be stated and agreed on. If the action is unusually tricky (the character is safecracking 'by touch', without tools), that should also be agreed on. If the action is 'in-concept', the player will count as having wagered an extra token for purposes of winning. If it is 'difficult', then the Guide will count as having wagered an extra token.
- **Helping:** Anyone not wagering can choose to assist *either* side, declaring appropriate actions as their character or just "throwing in" as players on either side. To do so, they toss a token of theirs to the pile in the middle. The side that has the *most* helpers will count as having wagered an extra token.
- **The Wager Proper:** Once stakes, concept, difficulty, and helpers have been declared, the player secretly chooses and holds a number of tokens to 'wager' on the outcome; the more they wager, the more they are saying they want to win - they *must* wager at least one token. The Guide does the same. Once both have their wagered tokens held out (in a closed hand), they reveal them together.
- **Resolution:** Whoever has the highest wager (including bonuses, if they apply) wins. The two sides then *swap* the tokens they wagered. The Guide describes the outcome, and play resumes. *If the wager is a tie, the player wins, and the Guide gets all but one of the tokens wagered - that one goes to the pile in the middle.*
- **Player vs. Player:** If a wager is between two players, both can call their concepts; it's never 'difficult'. On a tie, neither wins; the Guide describes a 'stalemate', all tokens wagered go to the middle.

PAYMENTS

Fairly often, players and Guide ‘stretch’ their authority. If the Guide describes a foreboding castle on the hill, and the sounds of wolves howling, great! If they add “a chill runs down your spine”, they’ve stepped outside their authority, describing how the characters *feel* about something. Usually, the players shouldn’t worry about it, just as the Guide won’t worry if a player declares that they grab a bottle off a bar when no bottles have been described there. When it does matter, the person in charge of the thing can deny down the idea, or ask the person describing it to pay for it’s inclusion in tokens. Such payments go to the tokens in the middle of play. Some notes:

- **Character Reaction:** If the Guide declares that seeing the Thing That Should Not Be drives a character back in utter terror, the player can might just say “That’ll cost you a token, there.”
- **Scene Additions:** If a player declares in the middle of a car chase that they’re going to escape by finding and driving into an alley too narrow for pursuit to manage, the Guide could ask for a payment for the creation of such an alley, since this manipulates the setting.
- **How many Tokens?:** For an declaration that is clearly a change, but is both reasonable and normal for the game style, a single token is a good payment. If the statement is abnormal for the setting or character, but can be easily explained, two tokens is standard. After this point, denying the statement completely is usually best.
- **Replacing Wagers:** A payment *can* replace a wager. If a player declares that their big bruiser character beats the tar out of a guy who is in their way, the Guide might just say “one token”.



AWARDS

The tokens in the middle of play get into use as awards. Any time someone declares something that adds a lot to the game, toss them a token *from the pile* to add to their own; if someone already has, toss them a second one if it was incredible. Guides and players can both give and receive tokens. Some times when this is very appropriate:

- **Intensity:** Whenever a player has their character act in a way that intensifies one of their ‘starting’ relationships, *and* creates further action by doing so, award them. But note that there comes a point where resolving things is better than making them more intense.
- **Genre:** If you shudder in response to a description in a horror game, laugh out loud in response in a comedy game, hear a great ‘stunt’ description in an action game, or notice pathos-laden self-destruction in a tragedy, and it “feels” right, award it!

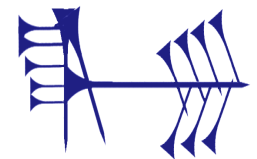
SOME NOTES FOR THE GUIDE

Once you have hold of the situation, it’s up to you to pressure that situation and characters until it resolves. Here’s a basic how-to:

1. **The Pressure Hits:** Start off play with a scene of your creation, centered on an event that puts pressure on the characters, showing off or intensifying the core conflict. Zombies get into the office. The Cat Show characters are informed that the event will receive national media coverage. And so on. This should always have or threaten an effect on the relationships and concepts of characters, should always require action, but not have a “right” solution (and you should *never* have pre-planned the way it turns out). Finally, it should always be able to get stronger and more personal over time.
2. **Goals Emerge:** As characters respond to the pressure over a few scenes, remind them to do so with an eye toward having goals for their characters - getting out of town, ruining Trish’s life, whatever. The goals are their choice, but they should make the goals known.
3. **Ramping up, With Breaks:** As the players are forming goals, things should still be ramping up. Zombies attack. Interviewers start coming to talk with Cat Show people. Each event should increase the pressure, aiding and opposing goals, requiring new decisions and action. However, the game shouldn’t be a constant push - there should be “breathers” and character scenes on the way.
4. **The Big Finish:** At whatever point in play (often between one and four hours, depending on the situation), the situation will have gotten as intense as it really can, and it’ll be time for you to set up a scene or group of scenes where the pressure peaks and goals are resolved or not. When this happens, and how, is so flexible as to defy explaining - you’ll need to learn this part by doing it.
5. **Wrapping Up:** At the end, when the big finish is resolved, players often describe where they think their characters and events might go from there, as a kind of closing montage.



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