

OF

WILDERNESS MIRRORS

A BETTER SPY-PLAYING GAME

Wilderness of mirrors
So easy to deceive
My precious sense of rightness
Is sometimes so naïve
So that which I imagine
Is that which I believe

Rush, "Double Agent"

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Special Thanks to Daniel for asking all the hard questions. His questions (and my answers) can be found in the boxed text in the book. You should thank him, too. He made this a better game.

INTRODUCTION

They dared
me to do it.

They dared me to do it. They didn't know it at the time, or at the very least, they weren't thinking about it when they did it, but this is my story and I'm sticking to it.

My friends Baron and Vach wanted to play a spy game, but all the systems they found just didn't do what they wanted. They tried everything from *Spycraft* to *Top Secret*, but nothing really worked. Every time I talked to them, they were complaining about something or another. In fact, they had about twenty pages of house rules for *Spycraft* to make it into the game they wanted. That's when I said those fateful words.

"You know," I told them, "instead of messing around with someone else's system, you could just make your own."

They shook their heads and assured me it was far easier to modify an existing system than to come up with something from scratch.

"Nonsense," I told them. "We could come up with a spy game that does exactly what you want in about ten minutes."

They looked at me with the kind of disbelief I reserve for Creationists. "No," I told them. "It's easy. Look, let's take it apart, piece by piece."

It actually took me about fifteen minutes, but by the time I was done, I had something I was very happy with. They both told me it was brilliant... then they continued tweaking *Spycraft*.

I believe the reason for this is because the game I wrote for them wasn't a *real book*. It was just an idea I'd written down on paper. Well, perhaps now that this is a real game, in a real book, they'll look at it twice. This is my hope. Maybe if I dare 'em, they'll look. Yeah. That's it.

Either way, **this game is dedicated to my friends Baron and Vach**, monster mondo mutant spy fans who want "the perfect spy game." I don't know if mine is perfect (I'm still a huge fan of the original *James Bond: 007 RPG* from the '80's), but it's the best I could do. That's got to be good enough, right?

Right???

THE BIG THREE (FOUR) QUESTIONS

My business partner Jared Sorensen (he likes ABBA; he really does) always asks the same questions when people say, "I've got a roleplaying game." The questions are:

What is your game about?

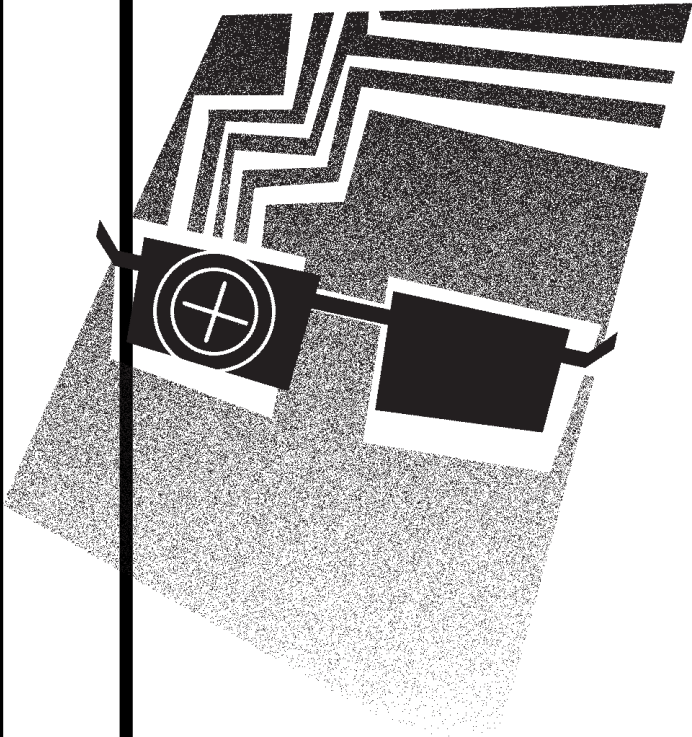
How does it go about doing that?

What behaviors does it reward?

I ask a fourth question:

Why is that fun?

So, here are my answers to those questions.



WHAT IS MY GAME ABOUT?

My game is about spies.

My game is about spies. More specifically, it's about creating the kind of atmosphere present in a James Bond or Jason Bourne novel. Players want to be James and Jason and we should let them do just that. Not first level chumps who have to work their way up the ladder to become Mr. and Mrs. Smith, but the kind of characters who can walk beside The Saint and Mrs. Peel without feeling like scrubs.

But spy novels aren't just about spies: they're also about paranoia. Bond never knows exactly who he can trust. Bourne novels are breeding ponds for suspicion. The most popular spy these days—Jennifer Garner's character in *Alias*—is surrounded by deceit. Fans of *24* know that Jack Bauer can't trust anyone... not even himself.

So, we've got *expertise* and *trust*. Two important elements to re-creating the kind of spy drama my buddies Baron and Vach love. But there's another element of spy films and novels that I dig the most, and that's *planning*. Watching *Mission: Impossible* teaches us that spies spend an inordinate amount of time planning a mission, but the *real* drama begins when one little thing goes wrong. That, of course, leads to some other tiny thing going wrong, which leads to another, and another, and another, until finally, you've got one huge rolling snowball of wrong rolling straight toward the spies. How our protagonists deal with that is why we read and watch.

In summary, we have three things that make spy literature so captivating: *expertise*, *trust*, and *planning*. I want players to feel that these three elements are *the most important* elements in the game. In order to do that, I have to make mechanics based on those elements. Let's get started.

Agents and Operations

A quick aside. Player characters are **agents** or **spies**. The Game Master is **Operations**.

HOW DOES MY GAME DO THAT?

Now that I know what my game is about, it's time to think of some mechanics that reflect those goals. Let's take them one step at a time.

Areas of Expertise

When talking to my buddies, they all said the same thing: "I wanna be Jason Bourne. I wanna be James Bond." Well, in a normal roleplaying game, James Bond would have to roll his stats or spend points on them in an effort to make him "balanced" with the other characters. In a fantasy roleplaying game, this could be argued as sensible (although don't ask me to do it; I'll go the other way), but in a spy game, such a goal is counter-intuitive to the end goal of making characters that emulate spies from our favorite movies and books.

Guys like James Bond and Jason Bourne have top scores in every stat. If we were playing a game... oh, let's say that used a d20 for all its task resolution, there's no way Jason Bourne has got anything less than an 18 in every stat. In fact, he's probably got twenties. I mean, pick a stat and try to justify a "game balance" that gives Bond less than an 18 in that stat. Go on. I dare you.

My buddy Jess Heinig once said something that really inspired me. "I want to design a game that rewards players for their choices, not punish them." He did it (with his *Dying Kingdoms* roleplaying game) and inspired me to try it here.

So, instead of having a system that punishes players for their choices, I decided to have a system that rewards them. Also, if you want to be Jason Bourne, you can be. Bourne can do *anything*, but he's not *the best* at *everything*. If you're Bourne, you may have to work a little harder in areas that aren't your *area of expertise*.

So, instead of stats, we've got AOE's: Areas of Expertise. Each and every spy can operate inside any of these AOE's, but each spy is the best at one of them. In this game, there are five Areas of Expertise, not based on physical or mental abilities, but on the method a spy uses to get the job done. And rather than using boring old adjectives, let's use words that sound more like code names.



Saturn

Team Leader. This is the guy who organizes other people to get what he needs.



Mars

The hitman. This is the guy who kills to get what he needs.



Mercury

The faceman. This is the guy who lies to get what he needs.



Vulcan

The fixer. This is the guy who uses technology to get what he needs.



Pluto

The shade. This is the guy who stays in the dark and steals what he needs.

What kind and how many dice will I need to play?

Six-sided dice. Get a lot of them. Ten per player.

Making Your Agent

So, let's make your agent. First, your agent has a 1 in each of these Areas of Expertise. Next, you get **thirty points** to put toward making those AOE better. Here's the trick: getting the first rank is free, but the second is *really expensive*. Getting more ranks is cheaper. This means it's easy to specialize in one Expertise, but it's really hard to be good at everything. The costs break down like **this**:

Expertise	Cost
1	Free
2	4
3	3
4	2
5	1

Any left-over points you have are lost. We'll talk about how you use your Expertise in a second. But first, let's talk about Planning.

Planning

My favorite part of any spy novel or heist movie is the planning. So, how do you use planning? Specifically, how do you make planning an important and vital part of the game? Easy! You make a mechanic out of it!

During the Planning Stage of the game, Operations presents the agents with a **goal**. This could be to extract an important hostage, eliminate a mole, or even seize the assets of a terrorist org overseas. Operations presents the scenario... and then the *players* make up the details.

In most spy fiction, the agents do all the footwork before they go into the mission. They do research, finding out everything they need to know before they take a single step. This is an important part of spy fiction, so let's make it an important part of our spy game.

Operations (the GM) comes up with the premise and *only* the premise. He tells the players, "Get the UN Ambassador out of Saudi Arabia," and the players spend the next hour or so planning on how they're going to do it, right down to the last detail. The players tell Operations about the terrorist organization that's holding the hostage, where the terrorist are keeping the hostage, the men heading up that organization, all the details, all the problems, all the entry points, all the exit points... the players tell Operations everything.

All the details the players give Operations are worth **Mission Points** (MP). The more details you give, the more MPs the players get. When all the planning is done, the players tally up their Mission Points and allocate the points to the team depending on each member's Expertise. For some missions, the wetman (Mars) needs a lot of dice. For some missions, the talker (Mercury) gets most of the dice.

The more complicated a detail is, the more Mission Points it is worth. In other words, the more difficult the players make the mission, the more they're rewarded for it.

Allocating Mission Points

Saturn (the team leader) allocates Mission Points to the team. It's up to him.

Using Expertise

Now, here's where Expertise comes into play.

When you spend a Mission Point on an action, you add it to your Area of Expertise for the number of dice you roll. For example, if you want to shoot someone, you use your Mars Expertise. Let's say your Mars Expertise is 3. If you spend one MP, you roll four dice. If you spend two MPs, you roll five dice. The more dice you roll, the more narrative control you have over action.

This encourages players to utilize their Agents' strengths rather than their weaknesses, but still does not cripple them. If you are the shooter and you need to talk, you can still roll a ton of dice, but it costs you more to do it. This way, everybody has a 20 in all their stats, but it's just a little tougher for some guys to do things they aren't used to.

If you need to take a risk but have no Mission Points, roll a number of dice equal to your Expertise.

How many MPs do I get for each detail? I'm assuming 1:1.

The usual ratio is 1:1, but if Operations feels a details is particularly juicy, adding a dramatic twist to the plot, he can award more. Awarding 2 Mission Points per detail should be rare and awarding 3 should only occur once per Mission at most.

Experts and Special Effects

On your team, whoever has the highest level of Expertise is considered the Expert in that field. In other words, if your spy has the highest Mars, he's considered the hitman of the squad. If two or more agents have the same expertise, they are both considered Experts.

Once per game, an Expert can trigger his AOE's "special effect." Each AOE gets one and it can only be triggered once per game. That means, even if you have multiple hitmen, the hitman's special effect can only be triggered once per game. Triggering these effects requires the use of Missing Dice.

Risk

Most roleplaying games say something about "whenever your character takes an action, roll dice to see if he succeeds or fails." Well, that ain't what being a spy is about. Spies don't "take actions," they *take risks*. With that in mind, let's look at the basic resolution mechanic.

Whenever your agent takes a risk—an action that puts the agent or another character in danger or significantly influences the plot—roll dice. You roll a number of six-sided dice equal to the most appropriate Expertise. Check the total of your roll with **this table** to determine the outcome.

- Once per game, the team leader can spend a Mission Point and *give any other player a re-roll*.
- Once per game, the hitman can spend a Mission Point and *make a kill without rolling any dice*.
- Once per game, the faceman can spend a Mission Point and *make anyone believe anything he wants*.
- Once per game, the fixer can spend a Mission Point and *have the exact right tool or weapon he needs*.
- Once per game, the shade can spend a Mission Point and *move through any area without being detected*.



Roll Outcome

1–5	Operations Narrates
6–10	Operations Narrates with one Agent Veto
11–15	Agent Narrates with one Operations Veto
16–20+	Agent Narrates

Narrative Control

Narrative control has become a subject of obsession for myself and Jess Heinig lately. No reason not to use it here. Narrative control may sound like a new-fangled high-falutin' artsy fartsy wanna-be actor idea, but it's actually one of the oldest ideas in roleplaying. In most roleplaying games, the Game Master has complete narrative control. The character takes a risk, the player rolls dice, and the GM says what happens. In this circumstance, the roll determines who gets to narrate the outcome.

If the player gets to narrate the risk, he doesn't have to make his agent succeed. He can force his agent to fail instead, *but he can control the outcome*. Take Indiana Jones for example. He jumps across the pit... and he fails. But he scrambles to find a root vine, pulls himself up, and rolls through the quickly closing stone wall. The player got to narrate the scene and he narrated a failure, *but he got to control the failure*.

Meanwhile, if Operations gets to narrate the outcome, he doesn't necessarily have to force the agent to fail. He can force the agent to succeed, *but he gets to control the success*.

Han Solo trying to con the intercom on the Death Star...

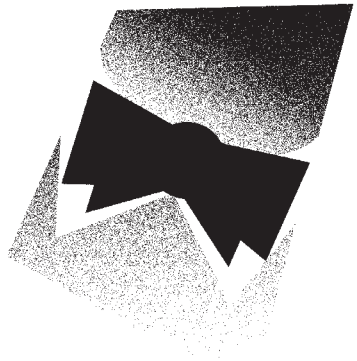
Ray Stanz and the Staypuft Marshmallow Man...

Jack Burton and... well, his whole life.

Narrative control, shifting back and forth between Operations and the players, allows a different kind of roleplaying experience.

The resolution chart notes possible results including getting a "veto." What kind of veto does Operations or a player get?

I would say, for the purposes of challenging the players and making the game fun, that you should employ the old improvisational rule of "Yes, but..." or "Yes, and...". The veto cannot change a fact, but only modify it. So, if a player is trying to unlock the door and gets a "Success, but Veto" result, he says, "The door is unlocked." Operations then says, "Yes, but it set off a silent alarm somewhere in the building."



WHAT BEHAVIORS DOES MY GAME REWARD?

1. Betraying others.
2. Getting the job done quick.

We do this with two mechanics: Trust and Time.

Trust

Another important element of spy literature is trust. In TV shows like *Alias*, the protagonists have no clue in whom they can place their trust. This, for me, is one of the pivotal elements of the spy genre and something no spy-themed game has ever addressed in a real way. So, I did.

In the *La Femme Nikita* TV show (everybody should see the first season), agents died left and right, but not because the missions were dangerous (and they were dangerous), but because Operations (the guy in charge) deliberately kills them. As an Agent in Section One, you never know when you may be put on “abeyance.” When an agent was put on abeyance, it meant he was disposable. You never knew.

So, let’s pretend Operations (that’s me) has put one of the Agents on abeyance. I don’t tell the Agent, but I do tell his team leader. And I tell the team leader not to tell the Agent. See, the abeyance Agent has been double-dipping: he’s informing the Enemy about missions. So, what we’re going to do is this: we’re giving him a bomb to set, but the bomb doesn’t have a five minute timer, it has a twenty second timer. The abeyance agent does not know this. When the bomb goes off, it’s the team leader’s job to make sure

the rest of the team is out of the way. It's up to him to plan a mission that gets the Obedience Operative killed.

Now our unlucky team leader knows the Agent in question is no traitor, but he does not trust Operations, either. So now he has to figure out a way to keep the Agent alive and clear his name without getting himself on the Bad Kid List.

Ah, conflict. How I love thy ways...

When the team leader gives the abeyance agent the bomb, I give the Team Leader three dice. These are called "Trust Dice." (The name is ironic.) I give a player Trust Dice whenever he does something that actively sabotages another player. This does two things. First, it rewards players for betraying each other. Second, it informs the other players that the betrayer is up to something.

I seed mistrust and doubt. Excellent.

Remember: the Team Leader allocates all the Mission Points to the other players. The only way to get more dice is to actively plot against your fellow agents.

By the way, for the purposes of Trust Dice, Operations is considered an agent.

Time

Finally, when it's time to pull the caper, we come down to the issue of time. Time is always an important element in spy literature, but it's never really addressed in games. This is my solution.

(Actually, I have *three* solutions: two from me and one from Jess Heinig. I'm providing both because I think both of them work well in different ways. I liked all three mechanics, so I included all three. Pick the one you like the most.)

Can I betray Operations and get Trust Dice?

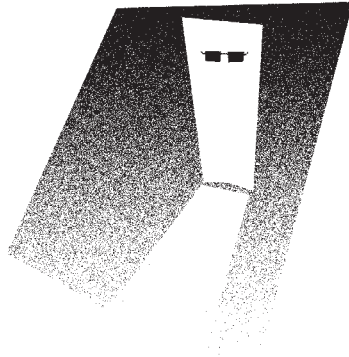
Yes, you can.

(You duplicitous bastard.)



Solution #1

For every twenty minutes of *real time* that passes, subtract 5 from all the players' rolls. The longer the Agents take on a mission, the more difficult the mission becomes.



Solution #2

For every twenty minutes of *real time*, the team gets a point of **Setback**. At any time during the game, Operations can spend a point of Setback, moving his narrative control up by one notch. If he gets only one veto, he gets full control; if he gets no control, he gets one veto. If he has full control, he can do permanent damage to your agent.

You see, agents never get permanent damage. Well, almost never. Bond does have a dueling scar after all. And he did lose his wife to a sniper... on their wedding day, no less. I'd count that as "permanent damage." In other words, if Operations spends a point of Setback when he has full narrative control, he can permanently scar your agent.

Solution #3

When I told this mechanic to Jess Heinig, he suggested a slightly different Time Mechanic: for every twenty minutes of time that passes, every player loses one Mission Point. (You can also do it so that *one* player loses a Mission Point. It's up to you.) This also represents the fact that as the mission goes on, complications make even simple things difficult. Finally, let's ask my question. Why is this fun?

Well, spies are fun. Not knowing the outcome of a die roll and improvising around the result is fun. And, frankly, being James Bond is fun. You get the car, the gadgets, the danger, the exotic travel, and the Bond Girl. Or, if you prefer, the Bond Guy. Here, at the Brewery, we don't discriminate.

WHY

IS THAT FUN?

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DEBRIEFING

Here, at the end, you have everything you need to play a fast-paced spy game. Everything else is just details. Now, you need to actually *read* those James Bond and Jason Bourne novels. Go watch *La Femme Nikita*, *Alias*, *The Saint*, *The Avengers*, and *Mission: Impossible* (the show, not the movie).

It has been brought to my attention that this little ditty would make for a fine caper game. The same rules apply. You've got a team of capable folks, a mission (in this case, a criminal one), planning, timing and complications. And betrayal. Let's not forget betrayal.

It hadn't escaped my notice. Being a fan of Richard Stark's Parker novels, I knew exactly what I was doing, but I try to follow a simple rule: "Make a game that does one thing and does it better than anything else." So, a caper game will follow, but not now. A little later.

Now go on out and get your spy on.

MISSION PREP

Step One: Assignment

Operations (GM) gives the agents a one sentence mission. "Find the kidnapped hostages," "Assassinate the rogue general," "Bring back the stolen gold," etc.

Step Two: Planning

The agents (players) go through all the steps of doing the mission. They come up with the obstacles and advantages they'll need. Operations rewards them with Mission Points. The more difficult the players make the mission for their agents, the more Operations rewards their efforts.

Step Three: Allocation

The team leader (the agent with the highest Saturn rating) allocates the Mission Dice to himself and the other players. Each player also gets a number of bonus Mission Dice equal to the Saturn AOE of the team leader. The team leader himself does not get this bonus.

Step Four: The Mission

The agents carry out the mission. Whenever an agent takes a risk, he rolls a number of dice equal to his appropriate Expertise plus one die per Mission Point he spends.

Once per game, the Expert of a particular AOE may spend a Mission Point for a specific special effect.

