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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

Opening the Horse

An approach to queer game design.

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts
in
Digital Arts and New Media

by

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December 2017

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Opening the Horse: An Approach to Queer Game Design

Matthew R.F. Balousek

Abstract

The aim of this project is the development of a new approach to queer formalism in games.

To paraphrase Bertolt Brecht, unpolitical art is only that which espouses accepted ideologies. Art which aims to challenge these ideologies risks dismissal from audiences who regard it as political. There is a potential remedy in formalism. Formalist art communicates ideology foremost through the formal elements of a medium. For games, these formal elements include data and procedure. Formalism brings obfuscation, as understanding data and procedure requires extended interaction. Because of this, formalist games can function as ideological Trojan Horses. But this advantage is also a flaw, as the Greeks inside must wait for the audience to open the horse's door. If this never happens, the work fails as a piece of rhetoric. Queer formalist games, for example, risk being misread as participating in heteronormativity.

Two things are proposed. The first is a framework for understanding ideology in art. Ideology can inscribed through formalism, as well as represented through

imaging. These are orthogonal approaches. Failing both, it is absent; succeeding both, it is present.

The second proposal is an approach to queer formalism in games called Opening the Horse. This approach seeks to maintain the qualities of formalist work while mitigating misreadings. A game enacting this method at first only inscribes ideology, adding representation at a later stage of interaction. This collapses the distance of metaphor as a kind of failsafe to make clear what the game is speaking to. A series of tabletop games created by the author serve to illustrate this design approach.

Dedication

To my friends and partners over these years. More than anything I've ever undertaken, this project is deeply reliant on other humans. It is fortunate, then, that I am in the company of so many of them who are wonderful.

Acknowledgement

This is made possible by the generous support of the Digital Arts and New Media department at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

I would like to thank my advisors Robin Hunicke, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, and Bonnie Ruberg for their guidance and feedback throughout the development of this project.

I am also deeply grateful for the friendship and brilliance of the members of the Expressive Intelligence Studio and the Computational Media department.

This work would not be possible without the participation and play of the people who have playtested these projects, whether they realized they were crucial or not. I also owe a great debt to all the people who I dragged into playing tabletop games in the name of research.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an upswell in queer representation across all kinds of media, but within the context of games these narratives often ring hollow—they are queer surfaces limply overlaid onto heteronormative scaffolding.

Published in 1984, the widely-read introductory computer science textbook *Structure and Interpretation of Computer Programs* espouses that “a computer language is not just a way of getting a computer to perform operations but [is rather] a novel formal medium for expressing ideas about methodology” (Abelson, et al. xxii). Though code-as-text is not without its failings as a framework, the attendant structures, systems, and procedures produced by code yet hold the potential for deep ideological meaning and expression. As discussed further on, the core elements of computation are *data* and *procedure*, which are themselves not unique to computation.

I consider these two materials broadly to come to an understanding of how games—computational or otherwise—can communicate ideology to their players, and how creators can leverage this understanding in the employment of a design methodology which is rooted in queer formalism while addressing the potential failings of a purely formalist approach.

2. Ideology in Form and Image

2.1. Queer

The word *queer* is overloaded with more than its fair share of meanings, some of which can be difficult to delineate even in context. In contemporary contexts its predominant usage is as a term to refer to LGBT+ individuals. In this sense it is most easily understood as the inverse of a set. Queers exists outside of heterosexuality and/or cisness as people of color exists outside of whiteness. Other usages in common parlance tend to be slippery in their meaning. It is then necessary before any discussion of its formal inclusion in art to come to a clear understanding of what exactly it means. As well, I think it is productive to adopt Muñoz's methodology and take "a backward glance [in order to enact] a future vision" of the term (4).

As a form of shorthand, this text borrows a piece of programming language syntax called the namespace operator for clarification. For example, a *boat::bow* is the front of a ship, while a *gesture::bow* is the act of bending the upper body. These are readable as "bow-as-in-boat" and "bow-as-in-gesture." The definitions that follow are sourced primarily from *OED Online*.

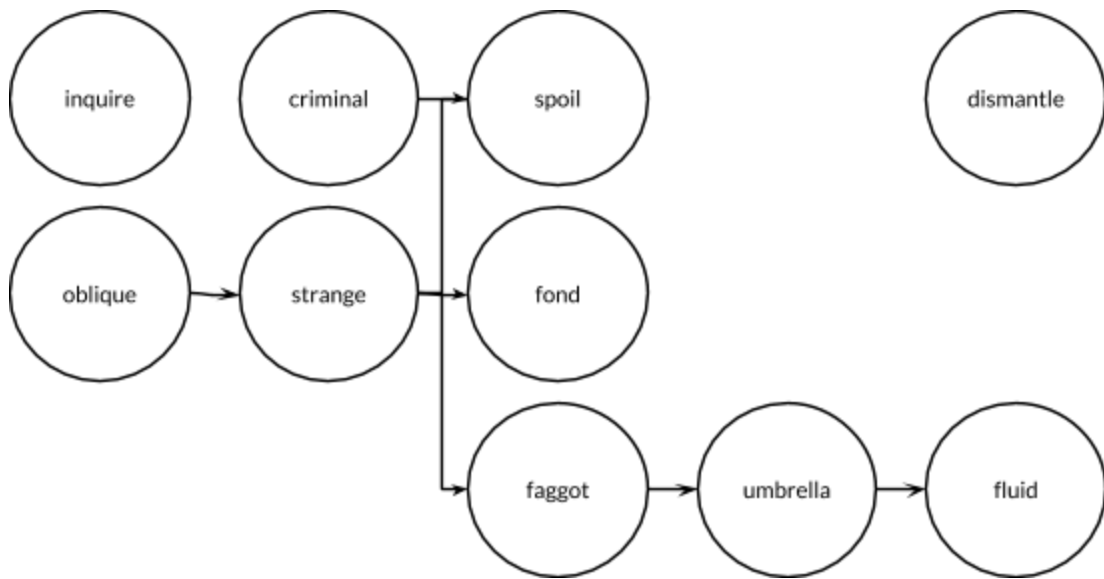


fig 2.1.a: An etymological map of queerness.

2.1.1. Etymologies and Alternate Histories

2.1.1.1. oblique::queer (adj.)

The German *quer* is an adjective that can be applied to line, glances, structural elements, and so on going at a slant or diagonal angle ("queer, adj.1."). While never used quite in this sense in English, it can be understood as *oblique::queer*. Though perhaps a further stretch¹, it's worth noting that oblique and straight are considered antonyms, positioning queerness—or perhaps querness—even at this early stage as being a concept which resides in opposition to straightness ("oblique").

¹ The archaic past participle of stretch: straight ("straight, adj., n., and adv.").

2.1.1.2. *inquire::queer* (v.)

The oldest form of *queer* dating back to the fourteenth century appears to be unrelated to *strange::queer*, and has ties to French and the Latin *quaerere*: to seek, ask, or inquire (“*queer*, v.1.”). In regional forms of English, and particularly in Scottish English, the word still maintains this meaning. Cf. the derivative form in Scottish English *quering* (adj.): inquisitive (“*queer*, v.1.”). We see this term in English today in terms like *query* and *question*, which are unrelated etymologically to any other senses of *queer* discussed here, but are useful conceptual cousins—a found family of sorts.

In imagining the future of queerness considered broadly, perhaps it is this sense of the word that will be a better source of strength to draw from—emphasizing the criticality that is the impetus for deviation rather than the deviation itself.

2.1.2. *Historical Usage*

2.1.2.1. *strange::queer* (adj., n.)

The etymology of *strange::queer* is unclear, but perhaps comes from *oblique::queer*² (“*queer*, adj.1.”). This sense of the word began seeing usage in the beginning of the sixteenth century, seeing decline after the formation of *faggot::queer* around the turn of the twentieth century (“*queer*, adj.1.”). It is this

² Cf. the German *querkopf* and the English idiom “*queer fellow*.”

sense, as well as potentially *criminal::queer* that are the English roots of all of the senses discussed here. The notion of obliqueness is useful here—to describe a sense of strangeness or obliqueness requires there to be a constructed sense of normal to deviate from.

2.1.2.2. *criminal::queer* (adj.)

This sense has uncertain origins, but was in use in criminal slang in the mid-sixteenth century (“queer, adj.2 and n.1”). Here several meanings are collapsed into *criminal::queer*, taken to mean simply something that is of a criminal nature, particularly of counterfeit money³. Of particular note is the phrase “on the queer,” meaning a person who was living through criminal means, particularly counterfeiting money (“queer, adj.2 and n.1”). Compare this with the phrase “going straight,” still in use today—as in to give up a criminal lifestyle.

2.1.2.3. *fond::queer* (adj.)

Here again, several discrete meanings will be collapsed. From the mid-eighteenth century and forward, the word could be used to mean variants on unwell, giddy, silly, or drunk (“queer, adj.1”). In this sense, it seems a sensible extension of *strange::queer* applied bodily. An American colloquial phrase in the mid-twentieth century is useful: “to be queer for” meant to be fond of or

³ Cf. “queer as a three-dollar bill”

attracted to something⁴ (“queer, adj.1”). Here, queerness has roots as a kind of bodily feeling—a heady mixture of affection, queasiness, silly drunkenness, and butterflies in the stomach.

2.1.2.4. *spoil::queer* (v.)

Seeming to be a combination of *strange::queer* and *criminal::queer*, this sense can mean to cheat, swindle, or vex, and to spoil someone’s reputation (“queer, v.2”). The related idiom “to queer the pitch” then means to disrupt someone’s affairs—a variant on this idiom is “to queer the game.” There is a strong link to the figure of the *spoil-sport*—a player in a game who “trespasses against the rules or ignores them,” representing a deviation or questioning of the order of rules and play (Huizinga 11). To *inquire::queer* the boundaries of the Magic Circle in this way is to threaten to collapse the game itself, bringing the unordered chaos of the world beyond flooding in.

2.1.3. *Contemporary Usage*

2.1.3.1. *faggot::queer* (adj., n.)

Around the end of the nineteenth century, the sense *faggot::queer* begins to be applied to men who were—or who were perceived to be—non-heterosexual.

⁴ Cf. the similarly-functioning colloquialism “to be gay for” someone or something, as well as senses of *gay* which had connotations of hedonism.

The pejorative weight of this sense should be underlined, as this sense was used to establish recipients as Others, deviants, perverts, &c.

Certainly by the late 1980s, the term had shifted from referring to men specifically and into *umbrella::queer*. This is seen in a call to reclaim the term by the group Queer Nation, using its pejorative nature to fuel political activism in their 1990 flier “Queers Read This”:

Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. ... Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him.

In recent years there's been much discussion over the use of the term—specifically as *umbrella::queer* and the messy and uncomfortable weight of the term as a slur in continued usage. First coined in 1869, the term *homosexual* was considered a sexual pathology for much of its history, finally being removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1973 (Drescher). *Gay*, aside from its older associations

with hedonism, has more recently taken on negative valence in the sense of foolish or stupid (“gay, adj., adv., and n.”).

This is to say: in the mouth of a bigot, any word can become a slur.

2.1.3.2. *umbrella::queer* (adj., n.)

Contemporary usage often refers to the broad community of LGBT+ individuals. In this sense one can understand it as the inverse of a set. Queer people exist outside of heterosexuality and/or cisness as people of color exist outside of whiteness.

The term GSM (Gender or Sexual Minority) or variants thereupon is sometimes used, but the relational structures implied by the term minority wear away at the usefulness and generality of the term—though it is perhaps fair to direct this same criticism at a notion like *strange::queer*. More popular terms tend to take the form of “alphabet soup” acronyms, the most common being LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans). Efforts to widen the radius of the umbrella have grown it in into terms like QUILTBAG⁵.

Despite best intentions these acronyms inevitably tend to leave out subsets of the communities they intend to represent. Indeed, each of those terms often is defined within its own community as an umbrella unto itself. For example, it is

⁵ Commonly articulated as Queer/Questioning, Undecided, Intersex, Lesbian, Transgender/Transexual, Bisexual, Allied/Asexual, Gay/Genderqueer.

not uncommon within the asexual community to discuss asexuality as a spectrum, using such terms as *demisexual* and *graysexual* to loosely categorize the ways in which desire does or does not manifest. Bisexuality can be broken down further by usage of the Kinsey Scale and other categorical tools, as well as expanding to include neologisms like polysexual or pansexual which aim to problematize and address the notion of gender binaries. The rate at which the language surrounding these communities develops and mutates is faster than any speed at which organizations could even attempt to adapt to these changes. To counter this, it's not uncommon for groups serving the communities involved to simply use *umbrella::queer* to avoid the problem of the umbrella being defined as a sum of parts and instead define it in the inverse.

2.1.3.3. *fluid::queer* (adj., n.)

While *umbrella::queer* refers to a broad population which holds a diverse set of identities, *fluid::queer* refers to a diverse set of identities in an individual, functioning as a form of gender and/or orientation. It takes on the meaning that a particular facet of identity is fluid and mutable. The inherent and intentional ambiguity of the term functions as an attempt to question or challenge notions of gender or orientation altogether, or even to refuse the question. To be *fluid::queer* is to be all and nothing simultaneously, in regards to its affinity with other identities in the same domain.

2.1.4. *Queer as Ideology*

Queer is all of the preceding and more, a heaping helping of meaning all tied up in a single syllable. I propose to draw on all of it in consideration of the following.

Queer is divergence. It is a diagonal line drawn across a grid. It is the unspecifiable sense of oddity disturbing the peace.

Queer is inquisition. A questioning of norms—both those of heteronormativity and homonormativity—and a spoiling of the Magic Circle they've constructed in order to play unperturbed by the world outside.

Queer is criminal. An enterprise rejected by society repeatedly, a painful history of oppression and discrimination to keep close while working toward the future. In this sort of self-effacement, the hope is that the reinforcement of Otherness is useful in the motivation towards new futures. To ignore this aspect is a Utopic vision worth working towards, but risks erasure of oppression.

Queer is love. It is a fondness and a giddy love-drunk feeling, a community and collection of relationships. "Every time we fuck, we win" ("Queers Read This").

2.1.4.1. *dismantle::queer*

In the current context of games following the wide-reaching events of Gamergate (see Alexander), there has been much hand-wringing about

developers and critics outside of the set of heterosexual white men “ruining videogames” by bringing their subjective life experiences to bear on their work in a field which was previously thought by these same hand-wringers to be politically and ideologically neutral. For some of these developers, as well as for this project, the aim is to *spoil::queer* the game.

From this, I suggest the term *dismantle::queer* (v.): the disruption, questioning, or opposition of normative⁶ structures, especially in regards to gender and orientation, and especially with the aid of or an emphasis on relationality. Queer as an ideology, then, is about the practice of this sense of the word in a broad sense.

2.2. Games and Bridges

Robert Moses was a city planner with a long and illustrious career. One project in particular that he was involved in was Jones Beach in New York. In a discussion about the ethics of science and technology, Langdon Winner writes about Robert Moses’s involvement with the beach at length in his paper “Do Artifacts Have Politics?”

Moses made sure that the overpasses on the parkways only had between eight and nine feet of clearance. Buses, however, were typically around twelve feet tall. Which meant that these overpasses became very literal barriers of entry to

⁶ Both heteronormative and homonormative.

groups who would rely on public transit—namely, people of color and low-income folks⁷. There are about two hundred of these overpasses throughout Long Island.

Winner writes: “Even those who happened to notice this structural peculiarity would not be inclined to attach any special meaning to it. In our accustomed way of looking at things like roads and bridges we see the details of form as innocuous, and seldom give them a second thought” (123). Technology is often framed as a neutral or apolitical thing, but the things made by people will always be descended from the ideologies those people hold.

2.2.1. Ideological Dimensions

A game can be queer in the same ways that a bridge can be racist. To consider the different ways to understand either, we can think of a particular piece of media as falling within an ideological space. That space can have any number of dimensions, each of which can be assigned a value between zero (indicating a failure of the heuristic) and one (indicating a success). Though I gesture at quantification, the evaluation of that value is necessarily subjective.

⁷ I am of course indulging in some architectural reductionism in calling a racist and/or classist highway overpass a racist bridge.

For my purposes I consider the primary two dimensions to be *representation* and *inscription*, but there are others that could be included or excluded from this model as well.

2.2.1.1. *Representation*

The dimension of representation is usually best understood through the heuristic of whether an ideology is imaged within a particular media, for a broad sense of imaging.

Moses' bridges do not *represent* an articulation of racism as an ideology. Instead, imagine a bridge which does not attempt to control access to space through formal means, but which features racist slogans carved into the facade of the structure⁸. A bridge covered in racist graffiti could also be considered to be a bridge whose representation has been modified to include racist ideology.

Moving from bridges to games, there is an unresolved muddiness in representation as it pertains to queerness. I speak of ideology generally, which includes by extension people who hold an ideology. But the representation of *dismantle::queerness* in its form as an ideology does not completely overlap with the more common usage of the term which is *umbrella:queerness*. That is, *umbrella::queers* may not necessarily articulate their own ideologies as being in

⁸ Cf. the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, AL, whose namesake served in the Confederate Military, the U.S. Congress, and the Alabama Ku Klux Klan.

line with *dismantle::queer*. While it is possible to consider the two categories separately on their own dimension, this project will conflate the two and consider images of either queerness as group or ideology to both be forms of queer representation.

2.2.1.2. *Inscription*

Whether it's intentional, accidental, or unconscious, things made by humans have human ideologies baked into the structural elements that they are composed of. The dimension of inscription describes to what extent that's true for a particular ideology. The dimension of inscription describes how an ideology affects the formal aspects of the artifact.

A high evaluation on this axis represents *formalism*; notions of queerness (in any sense) that inform the data and procedures of a game are *queer formalism* specifically.

2.2.1.3. *Other Dimensions*

If a racist builds a bridge but neither represents nor inscribes those notions of racism into the artifact itself, is the bridge racist? Is a game queer if it both inscribes and represents queerness, but is created by straight creators? In consideration of these, a dimension of *authorship* is useful for taxonomic purposes.

As mentioned earlier, representation can also in certain cases be considered along multiple dimensions.

2.2.1.4. *Intersecting Dimensions*

Whichever subset of dimensions is being used, each dimension is orthogonal to the others. In the case of the basic intersection of representation and inscription, there is then a two-dimensional field containing a tetrachotomy of queer games. Where every dimension is low, queerness (or the ideology being considered) is *absent*. Where every dimension is high, it is instead fully *present*.

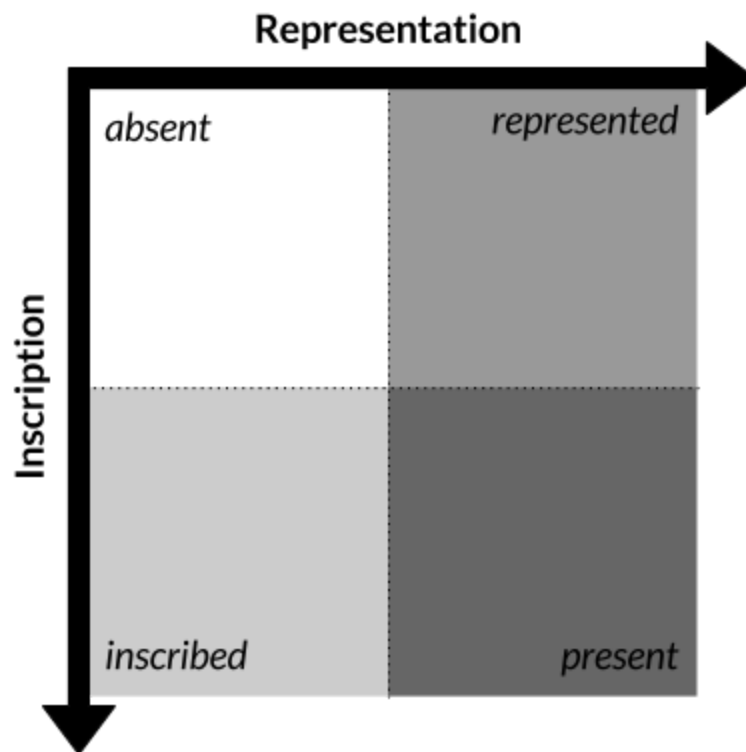


fig 2.2.1.4.a: *Two intersecting dimensions of queerness.*

2.2.2. *Data and Process*

While the materials of bridges are arrangements of stone and steel, to speak of games⁹ is to speak instead of the materials *data* and *procedure*—information and the rules for manipulating it, respectively. I will consider the two distinct for my purposes, but the categories are fraught¹⁰: the advent of the stored-program computer enabled reprogrammability by encoding computer procedures into data, while lambda calculus terms data at the most fundamental level in terms of procedures.

It's also necessary to distinguish the way I understand the term from the way it is commonly used in discussions of games. In discussions of game design, designer and writer Chris Crawford also speaks of data and process. Crawford understands the former in particular as what I would characterize as data *assets*. Specific instances of things that are displayed on screen: images, sound files, and so on. I see this case as a category of data, but not the entire picture. I am often speaking to what could be characterized as data structure or design, which differs significantly from assets in that it can often be difficult to perceive from the perspective of a player or user.

⁹ Computational or otherwise.

¹⁰ As is true of all categories. It is often a more instructive endeavor to consider how two unlike things—e.g., a raven and a writing desk—are alike than to say that they are in distinct categories.

2.2.2.1. *The Process of Quantification*

Procedures aren't the exclusive domain of computing, and many procedures we enact in our everyday life are subtle, even invisible things. Consider two maps of a region of coastal California: one shows the locations of all the major roads in that region, and the other shows with sorcerous accuracy the location of every mature oak tree. As the former is of little use to a silvologist, the latter is of little use to the driver who does not know the way to San Jose.¹¹

A map is a model of a region, which aids in its navigation by generally showing things in relation to each other. In a computational sense the map is data, with attendant procedures such as deducing the map reader's current location or discerning which way is north. But outside of the computational model, there also exists the cartographer, who must obscure, emphasize, quantify, or qualify features of a particular domain to create a readable map—a map necessarily contains less information than the reality it represents. That is to say that the map is never the territory, and the model is always wrong—but sometimes useful.

As the cartographer creates maps, so must the statistician, database engineer, or programmer decide which features are essential to the workings of a computational model (cf. Hughes). Though a map is data, it is data which is the

¹¹ Both are perhaps useful to a well-educated squirrel.

result of a myriad of computational and noncomputational procedures, and it is imperative to deduce the particulars of the cartography when considering a map. The act of encoding (or per Parrish, *forgetting*) reality into a more pliant model is necessarily subjective, according to the needs of the model and the ideologies and contexts of the author.

2.2.2.2. *Procedures, All the Way Down*

In *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost writes at length about procedures, being “the principal value of the computer, which creates meaning through the interaction of algorithms” (4). He goes on to coin the term *procedural rhetoric*: “the practice of using processes ... to change opinion or action ... [or] to convey ideas effectively” (28–29). Using procedural rhetoric we’re able to come to an understanding of the systems of taxation represented as procedures in *SimCity*, and in so doing be lead to a particular argument for how taxes should or should not function in societies. It is not a model, for example, in which we are able to understand the effect of racial dynamics, as this is not information which is encoded into the model. Excluding information from a model is equally—if not more—important as the inclusion of information.

2.4. Applied Framework

Before continuing to the thesis project itself, it is useful to linger on a few key examples to understand the intersecting dimensions of queerness in related works.

2.4.1. *A Map Without Utopia*

In a talk given at the Queerness and Games Conference in 2013, educator and independent game developer Robert Yang discussed the subject of encoding gender as data, the methods of which are beyond counting. The particular cartography engendered by a given map is an inherently ideological one. Setting aside the discussion of what gender is or is not, how can we encode it into data that can be manipulated by computational procedures? Is gender a number? Two numbers? A true or false value which represents whether the individual wears earrings? Yang suggests that a four-dimensional quaternion—typically used to represent rotational information in mathematics—may be as accurate as any other.

Pokémon is a series of videogames about children fighting each other for fame and fortune using wild animals as proxies—it is tremendously popular. In the first installment, the game only asks the player to give themselves a name of up to seven letters. The avatar which the player controls is always coded as being a young boy, a feature likely due to some combination of technical limitations and

an assumption on the part of the developer that the audience playing the game would be primarily male. In this case, the model of gender for the game is that gender is always male, as encoded not by variable data but rather by the graphical data which represents the player and the textual data which makes reference to the player with words like *boy*, *son*, &c. In later iterations of the series, the available encodings of gender that the game allowed doubled, by asking new players whether they were a *boy* or a *girl*. This choice is then represented visually as the graphical data for each character is different, and the text used to refer to them is also changed. Players who identify—or wish to identify—as anything beyond this binary *boy/girl* choice are then forced to make an awkward approximation into an incorrect data type if they wish to proceed playing the game. The work in the Advanced Identity Representation project, discussed later, is a useful reframing of this issue.

Social networking site Facebook employed a binary encoding of gender for many years, asking users to choose *man* or *woman* when creating their profile, though also permitting the user a third choice: *neither*. This decision affected the pronouns used to refer to the user in various descriptions of the user's activity. Though it is not necessarily productive to say that this model is evidence of Facebook's conspiratorial enforcement of the gender binary, as it is more likely a result of long-standing unexamined biases than active intention, it is just one way in which the processes of developing models for quantification

or qualification can be at best an unfaithful representation of reality and at worst an antagonistic claim of what is or it not a valid way of existing (Winner 125). Like Robert Moses's low bridges, "seemingly innocuous design features [in technology] actually mask social choices of profound significance" (Winner 127).

But unlike bridges, which are slightly onerous to change after their initial construction, computers are built on many layers of abstraction, from stored charge to machine code to assembly language and so on all the way up to interactive programs. And as static physical media becomes an increasingly less common means to transmit programs, they become increasingly mutable—especially in the context of web technologies. In 2014, Facebook expanded its previously ternary choice of gender to allow users to choose from 58¹² choices, as well as giving them the option to determine the pronouns used to refer to them independently of their gender, allowing members of *umbrella::queer* community a comparatively more accurate way of encoding themselves into the model¹³ (Oremus).

¹² A majority of these are nuanced variations of several primary options.

¹³ However, the social network's "real name policy" has continued to be hostile towards many within the *umbrella::queer* community, requiring them to in some cases be referred to on the website by their legal name instead of their preferred name.

2.4.2. Coffee: A Misunderstanding

In *Coffee: A Misunderstanding*, developer Dietrich Squinkifer “explicitly avoids modelling gender identity as a character attribute in any meaningful way,” focusing instead on “external, tangible ways in which gender is performed” and allowing these to readily change as the game progresses (24). This fundamentally *fluid::queer* model serves to support and reinforce the content of the game, which deals with a number of themes pertaining to shifting perspectives on gender. In a certain sense, the most flexible form of this particular kind of data is to not quantify or qualify it at all.

In their lecture “Beyond Representation: Queer Mechanics in Tabletop Games,” Avery Alder and Joli St. Patrick outline a number of what they call *queer mechanics*, ways in which systems can embody the concepts of queerness, broadly considered. *Coffee: A Misunderstanding* engages with a number of these, particularly with its treatment of gender being more about the absence of gender per se, which fits into what Alder and St. Patrick refer to as “The Fruitful Void.” Even when qualification of gender is present in the form of pronouns, the fluidity of these speaks to “Coding Fluidity/Uncertainty,” representing the way in which queer lives are “fluid, uncertain, changing, multidirectional, both clear and cloudy,” a notion succinctly summarized as the superposition of *both/neither* for a given dichotomy.

Rooted in similar structures in interactive fiction, *Coffee* centers on iterations of an awkward encounter between two strangers at a coffee shop. After the exchange ends, it begins again from the beginning with new performers chosen from the audience. With each iteration, aspects of the story change through performer selection of narrative branches in conjunction with a director-controlled value known as the "weirdness level" over the course of the performances (Squinkifer 18). As the audience first experiences the piece, topics of conversation are surface-level—largely platitudes or tangential anecdotes. As the audience delves deeper into the conversation tree through repeated iterations and increasing levels of weirdness, the content engages more with themes of gender, such as allowing characters to switch their pronouns to alternatives. In this sense, there are aspects of *Coffee* that are inscribed, which are present but not initially obvious to the audience or performers. Over time, the representation of themes pertaining to gender become more central to the story. Rather than enacting a shift from inscription to presence with respect to queerness such that it might be considered as a trojan horse, *Coffee* is billed as a "queer and socially awkward interactive play," and as such its queerness is fully present throughout the experience.

2.4.3. *Mass Effect*

Mass Effect is a series of videogames in which a group of unsupervised military personnel shoot lasers at organic and inorganic forms of life. In it, the player's

avatar is able to initiate romantic relationships with certain other members of their group. Though these are occasionally *umbrella::queer* relationships, they suffer from an oversight of polymorphism.

Here's a procedure: give me a feline, and I will use a tape measure to tell you with some degree of accuracy the length of its tail in centimeters. I can perform this procedure on any member of the family *felidae*, from a lion to a domestic kitten, since all cats have tails. In programming this relates to a process known as *polymorphism*, a powerful technique that allows a single procedure to operate over a larger number of cases, reducing the amount of work and maintenance necessary for a program. Polymorphism can be an excellent tool, but has the tendency to ignore the context in which data exists. For example, a kitten may not object to a brief exercise in quantification, but a hungry lion might decide to maul and eat me at some point during the procedure. I may be able to tell you that a cat born without a tail has a tail length of zero centimeters, but is that an accurate quantification? Suppose a breed of cats begins propagating across the world, whose tails vary in length according to the phase of the moon and the current season. should I give you it's longest length, the length it is at a given moment, or the average of all possible tail length values? Our procedure suddenly doesn't work so well once cats are introduced which go against our model.

The ways in which, for example, a male player character romances another male character in *Mass Effect* is nearly identical to the manner in which they might romance a female character¹⁴. This is a common flaw in games which aspire to have representations of *umbrella::queerness*. There is the line of thought, for example, that the ways in which a romance might blossom and proceed between two men is identical to the way in which it would between a man and a woman in a heteronormative society. This is the same logic and ignorance of the context beyond the formal procedure that produces the infamous question sometimes fielded to same-gender couples like “Which one of you is the woman?”¹⁵ It presumes that a relationship is equal to any other relationship, and that structures and patterns found in one are identical to another—a modeling decision that is either ignorant or naively optimistic. For example, it is generally unheard of that people in heterosexual relationships are ashamed of their sexual orientation, given that cultural norms valorize and encourage them. A polymorphic model of relationships derived from someone whose only experience with relationships are ones of the heterosexual variety would then be unlikely to encode notions of social stigma or shame into the model. In this sense, a standardized model is attempting to represent non-standard data, and

¹⁴ Though characters who do not necessarily fit into dichotomy of man/woman do exist in the game, they are generally presented as incapable of romantic involvement.

¹⁵ A: Neither.

attempts to accommodate these phenomenon will be necessarily inaccurate or not wholly applicable.

Without a model of *umbrella::queer* relationality, the representation of queer bodies falls flat, leaving the game with only a hollow kind of representation without inscription.

2.4.4. Chimeria: Gatekeeper

The research projects that fall under the label of the Advanced Identity Representation (AIR) Project by the Imagination, Computation, and Expression Laboratory at MIT are at a root level about forms of identity that fall somewhere between *yes* and *no*. *Chimeria: Gatekeeper* “uses a cognitive science-grounded model of social category membership” as a basis for the player to attempt to persuade a village guard to permit them entrance. The game tracks the player’s signified membership between two groups—the noble Sylvann and the earthy Brushwoods. The player is not discretely one or the other, however, and can attempt to affect their apparent membership on the Sylvann-Brushwood spectrum by, for example, hiding their jewelry or using colloquialisms in order to pass as similar to a plain-speaking guard. In this sense, the player’s identity is systemically or formally *fluid::queer*.

Though the game positions itself primarily as a model of racial identity, I argue that as a model of passing it is also applicable to queerness, and as such

queerness is inscribed but not represented. In its emphasis on the notion of passing, it has much in common with games centered on notions *umbrella::queer* stealth and the Closet such as *Lim* by merritt k. or *A Russian Valentine* by empty fortress.

3. Opening the Horse

3.1. Trojan Horses

Bertolt Brecht is quoted as saying that “[f]or art to be 'unpolitical' means only to ally itself with the 'ruling' group.” This holds true for the systems and technologies leveraged in games. Winner describes the tendency to frame technology as neutral or unpolitical as thus:

It is obvious that technologies can be used in ways that enhance the power, authority, and privilege of some over others, for example, the use of television to sell a candidate. To our accustomed way of thinking, technologies are seen as neutral tools that can be used well or poorly, for good, or something in between. But we usually do not stop to inquire whether a given device might have been designed and built in such away that it produces a set of consequences logically and temporally *prior* to any of its professed uses. (125)

As such, it may be a useful tactic to skirt around the issue of seeming ‘political’ in relation to other media—and thus undesirable to the mainstream—in the act of *dismantle::queering* games by enacting procedural rhetoric that espouses these ideologies on a formal level divorced from the representational aspects of *umbrella::queer*. In this way, norms can be more easily subverted because those within the mainstream may be more willing to engage with content that is ostensibly operating within norms. An ideological trojan horse, of sorts.

Representation is important for its own reasons, and this project is not intended to serve as a critique of projects focused on representation. The severely balkanized context of games is thorny bramble to attempt navigating, however. It has been seen repeatedly that games which are attempting to expand the modes of representation in games are isolated by the mainstream as having “an agenda” where other games do not. If this is the context of games, then perhaps it is necessary to attempt to encode rhetoric in subtler ways.

3.1.1. *The Rotting Greeks Problem*

Queer formalism offers a potential route into more subtle and more subversive rhetoric. Of the tetrachotomy of queer playable media established, the danger in the *inscribed* approach of queer formalism lies in what I call *The Rotting Greeks Problem*.

One of my earlier forays into queer formalism was through *Standoff* (Appendix 1), billed as “a game about telling ridiculous stories together.” The game was intended to inscribe a notion of decentering a notion of an avatar for the player, prompting them to shift through multiple identities over the course of the game. However, even in cases where players performed this shift, the line of rhetoric was not generally clear. As discussed on the subject of Moses’ bridges, the details of form were seemingly innocuous. To ask players to critically read the systems and emerge with a reading pertaining to queerness is to also ask people to look at an overpass on Long Island and understand its racism. Formalist approaches can demand a kind of critical systems thinking from the player that is not necessarily guaranteed.

To return to the metaphor of the rhetorical Trojan Horse, it is effectively putting the lock on the outside of the statue and running the risk that the Trojans playing host to the statue simply never open the door.

As a remedy to this problem, the proposal is to enact a shift in the field of queerness, to move from a game in which queerness is *inscribed* to one where it is fully *present*. The distance created by refraining from representation can allow the players to discuss a subject they might not be comfortable speaking openly of at first, then later reframe their understanding of those discussions after collapsing that distance. I call this method *Opening the Horse*, as it asks the

player to first open the Trojan Horse's door of their own volition, but attempts to ensure that the door is opened by the end of the experience. Of course, whether the Greeks have any luck in their rhetorical aims in the following skirmish is another issue.

3.2. Opening the Horse in Practice

The *Opening the Horse Collection* is a series of three tabletop games, each of which enacts the game design approach of the same name. The games—*On The Internet, Nobody.*, *Noons*, and *Squad Force Heroes*—are alike in format, but differ in content and the method in which they attempt to shift themselves into queer *presence*.

In form each of these games are printed as a zine-style booklet. They're formatted so they can be printed double-sided on 11x8.5in paper, then folded in half and stapled in the center. PDF versions are provided via web-based marketplaces such as itch.io, and printed booklets are available for mail order or are shown at festivals.

All three games are tabletop games intended for multiple players, and take about twenty minutes to play—the latter being a constraint arising from the audience expectations of the culminating MFA exhibition. They are all games

meant to be not read but played, so as to preserve some element of player surprise when dealing with the moments of horse-opening in particular.

3.2.1. Project Descriptions

For the full text of the games, see the appendix. In brief, they are summarized as follows:

A game superficially about wizards on the internet, *On The Internet, Nobody*, is a game that resembles hidden-role games like *Mafia* or *Werewolf*. It presents two inversions: instead of villagers hunting werewolves, the game presents instead the Othered group in a community of their own ferreting out the members of the group which have no claim to Otherness. In this sense the game depicts a reverse witch hunt, where monsters are trying to be rid of the unenchanted.

Squad Force Heroes is, on the surface, a game about stylish heroism which takes after genre media like *Power Rangers* and *Sailor Moon*. Players work together to create a transforming superhero team, then enter into a storytelling game which is controlled by simple actions in a card game.

Noons is a game about death on the frontier, in two parts. In the first part, "The Showdown at Low Noon," players take on the roles of vampires and vampire hunters in an old west saloon. They ask one another questions and eventually move on to a game which functions like a turn-based Rock Paper Scissors.

3.2.2. *Inscriptions and Openings*

On the Internet, Nobody. asks players to remove undesirable members from a community. Unknown to them, however, every player has the card that marks them as undesirable. Players quickly learn to lie about their own status, while policing others. Like *Noons*, it is a game about masking oneself and unmasking others. At the conclusion of the game, it is revealed that every player was undesirable.

The opening here consists of a passage from José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* to be read aloud. It asks players to think of queerness as a horizon that is always to be strived for, but never achieved. The intention is that players will understand their failure to be a correct form of the thing they desire to be is a failure everyone will embody. However, no other guidance is offered from the game, and in some playtests players even managed to skip the reading entirely on the assumption that the game had concluded.

Throughout *Squad Force Heroes*, players are asked to consider their *role*, a property of their character which structures their desires and behaviors in the game world. Role here is meant to act as a stand-in for forms of sexual identity. As play progresses, their categories are likely to shift as the game and the collaborative narrative ask different things of the player each round. As play

progresses, their role gets blurrier with the intention of destabilizing their understanding of their own identity.

After the game concludes, there is a secondary activity that follows. The players are asked to engage in a short exercise where they map sexual identities onto the four suits of a playing card deck, which was also a mapping they were asked to do with respect to their role. After this, they're instructed to reflect on which, if any, they inhabit, and also to consider whether that could or has changed over the course of their life. Playtests of early iterations of this saw students who didn't see any connection with the game they had just played, reflective perhaps of the players focusing on different aspects of the game than I had intended as a designer. For many the jump from superheroes to sexuality seemed to be a non-sequitur.

In *Noons*, the gameplay focus is similar to *On the Internet, Nobody*. The players are playing a hidden-information and turn-based version of Rock Paper Scissors, and trying to determine who is friend and who is foe through pointed question-asking and memorization. Players come to form a fuzzy map of who is safe, who is an ally, and who is actively trying to harm them.

Of the three games in the *Opening the Horse* collection, *Noons* is perhaps the most effective in terms of how it goes about opening the horse. After the game has completed, a second game begins. The game is similar in many ways to the

first one, but shifts the fiction from vampires in a dusty saloon to queers in the midst of a riot at a Pride event. Going through and repeating actions of the first game in the context tends to be very clearly affecting. Players are asked to determine who most recently watched a movie about a vampire in the first game, for example, and then asked to do the same about movies about queers. This determination merely lets players decide who goes first, but immediately asks players to reframe their discussion and think about their relationship to the content of the game.

In addition, *Noons* also opens the door the most forcefully of the three games. Rather than ending on a footnote, the game asks players to revisit with a new context which is very plainly about queerness. If the goal is to communicate rhetoric clearly, perhaps there isn't a level at which the opening of the horse can be too obvious.

3.2.3 Design Iterations

On the Internet, Nobody was originally designed as a game about schisms in queer communities, looking at how communities splintered themselves rather than found unity and solidarity with each other. Initial drafts also focused not on internet magicians but on internet animals. Essentially for the sole reason of supporting the pun "there are no dogs allowed on The Couch," players would try to evict any players who were dogs on an internet forum called The Couch.

Players generally didn't take to roleplaying the other animals (Spiders, Hawks, Frogs), and the lack of clear motivations as far as what to discuss were a frequent problem. The magical fiction is better-received, on the whole, and the addition of discussion prompts helps tremendously while also adding an opportunity to discuss the ways in which all players are false magicians through prompts focused on magical failure.

Squad Force Heroes saw the most iteration of the three projects. Initially owing to the game being too focused on being a game replicating the narrative structures of Power Rangers episodes, the system of role fluidity was not at the forefront of player understanding of the game. In addition, the game in early versions took about an hour or more to play, which would be an issue for exhibition contexts.

The core gameplay of *Noons* has persisted through all of its iterations, with most revisions being focused on something akin to user experience. The instructions and order of the game can be confusing for some players, so trying to sand those corners down constituted the bulk of revisions.

4. Conclusion

For exhibition of the project, a space was arranged in the style of a restaurant, with a single front desk to greet players and direct them through the space.

Once players were formed into groups of their own making or through matchmaking, they were brought to a semi-private space where they could play the game with minimal distractions.

While the restaurant-style installation was largely successful, issues of the MFA exhibition context complicated the exhibition. Chief among them was the lack of players during low-traffic periods being unable to play the game, as they failed overall to achieve a critical mass of players. To extend the metaphor of the restaurant further, this was a menu with only entrées. Adding a range of games that could support two-player play over a brief period of time, for example, would have allowed a number of interested people experience the work despite not having the time or bodies to play one of the primary works.

A preliminary idea was to give exhibition attendees “carry-out” if they were unable to play for any reason, in the hopes that they might play the game in the privacy of their own home. Due to printing quantity issues this was unfeasible for the exhibition. Attendees were directed to the online versions of the games instead.

The restaurant structure was useful in goading players to play the games instead of reading the game as if it were a book. The option to spectate was also appealing to a number of visitors, and the display of player-generated artifacts from play were a strong component that piqued interest and both convinced

people to play and also gave them something to occupy themselves with while waiting for ad-hoc matchmaking. For the exhibition the ad-hoc matchmaking approach was used, but there is perhaps a fruitful blend between fixed time slots and completely unstructured gatherings that fits best.

Overall reception to the games was mixed. Players who identified themselves in interviews as queer tended to show frustration with the lack of queerness on the axis of representation. Here again there seemed to be an overemphasis on systems understanding to have players parse out the queerness of the game. If there were any players who were diehard bigots, they didn't reveal themselves to me during any of the play sessions. More likely those who felt strong negative feelings about the games simply sulked away without saying anything. Audiences who reacted most favorably to the games were what I might jokingly call "level three allies" who wish to advance to the next level of allyship. In post-game interviews, these players were the most excited about the games and notions of queer inscription. For that reason, these games perhaps fall into the category of "queer games for straight players." Perhaps queer players can find use in the games as tools to speak to well-meaning allies, but their utility in speaking to those who wouldn't have listened in the first place is indeterminate.

Preface to the Appendices

A note on formatting: the text of the games that follow is unchanged, but the formatting has been significantly changed in order to facilitate their inclusion in this document. Notably, the original games were configured to fit on a half-page. For space, some pagebreaks have been removed. Fonts, font sizes, and so on differ from their original form.

Appendix 1: Standoff

a game about telling ridiculous stories together.

Version: June 4, 2016

Opening Text

The necromancer shrieks with cruel laughter, plunging the glowing dagger into the warrior's heart. Armor and bone tear like paper before the might of The Cursed Dagger of Ag'tekk. As the blood drains from the wound, Taft gloats, "Fool! All your struggle was for naught. Your soul will be but a tasty morsel for my dark master!"

He starts to pull the dagger out, but finds his wrist stopped cold by Francesca's iron grip. She stares back with an icy glare. Taft stammers, "I—Impossible! I caught you right in the heart!" A glint of light catches the necromancer's eye, and he looks down to see the talisman of protection. "But that means..."

Wresting the dagger from the necromancer's cold hands, Francesca grins. "That's right—I hid all my vital organs in a pocket dimension!" Taking a free hand to dip a finger in what appeared to be blood, she tastes it and chortles. "You wasted the ichor of Ag'tekk on nothing more than a large ketchup packet!"

Dedication

My sincere appreciation to all the wonderful folks who have playtested and given feedback on this game—without your brains and creativity I'd be nowhere. And thanks to Melanie and Joseph for going on a bizarre adventure with me.

You're all the best.

About This Game

Standoff is a game where everyone works together to tell a ridiculous story full of twists, ripostes, counter-feints, and triple-double-crosses.

Before playing, you'll need at least two, but ideally **four to six players**. You'll also need some **writing implements**, and at least a dozen **blank index cards**.

The general structure of the game is:

1. **Setup:** everyone works together to establish **the world** that the story takes place in and some of the **characters** that inhabit it.
2. **Play:** everyone tells the story through a series of **scenes** that are based on improvisation and creative reversals.

1. The World

Overview

Everyone sketches out the world that the story will take place in.
Recommended time: 5-10 minutes total.

1. Restrictions Story elements that are forbidden. <i>Add to as needed.</i>	2. Seeds Story elements that might be included. <i>Lock-or-Change.</i>
--	---

1.1 Restrictions

Write **Restrictions** in the top left of a blank card.

Add Restrictions as needed, unilaterally. If at any time a player isn't happy with an element that has been introduced or they think might be introduced into the story, that player can add that element to the Restrictions card.

Make everyone happy with the story being told. Elements on the Restrictions card should not be introduced into the story by anyone. These can be used to set aside uncomfortable topics, or as a tool to avoid common story elements.

1.2 Seeds

Write **Seeds** in the top left of a blank card.

Seeds are story suggestions. A Seed is an element to suggest what might be in the story. This can be anything a player can think of, but is often something like a location, object, character, theme, emotion, or so on.

Lock-or-Change Seeds. The player closest to the Seeds card announces a Seed and passes the card to their left. Then, each player in order chooses to either Lock or Change the most recent Seed. Lock a Seed by writing it down and announcing a new one. Change a Seed by announcing an altered or inverted version of the Seed. Repeat this until everyone has Locked or the card is full.

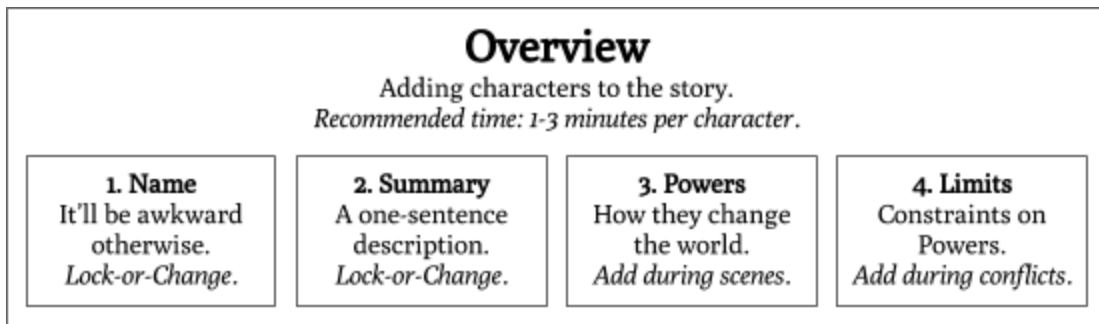
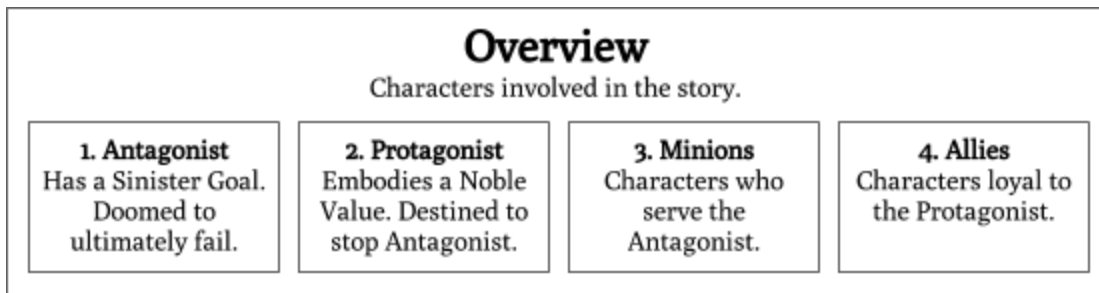
If anyone can't think of a Seed to contribute, use the Example Seeds table ([§4.1](#)).

Here are some examples of what the Restrictions and Seeds cards might look like.

Restrictions
no zombies no swords no damsels in distress no not offering tea to guests

Seeds
talking horses an ungallant knight dead presidents magic machines organic heirloom tomatoes

2. Characters



2.1 Character Cards

Important characters are represented with cards. Although any kind of character can be introduced for any reason, only make cards for the Antagonist, the Protagonist, or the characters loyal to them. Before play starts, you'll make an Antagonist and a Protagonist.

Characters don't belong to anyone. During play, anyone can narrate the actions or speak in the voice of any character.

Inhabit a character to take additional control of them. If someone is holding a character's card, that player is inhabiting that character and has ownership of that character's actions and speech for as long as they hold the card.

Inhabitation is negotiable. Players may take, request, relinquish, or exchange character cards at any time. Be nice. Collaborate. Share.

2.2 Creating Characters

Determine a character's basics using Lock-or-Change. Using the same process for writing down Seeds, determine a name and one-sentence summary for the character.

Unilaterally add Powers during scenes. Powers can be something fantastical or mundane, but they're something relatively unique that the character can do. Players can add Powers to characters during scenes or conflicts.

Unilaterally add Limits during conflicts. Limits are caveats on specific Powers. Any player may assign a Limit to a character's Power as part of resolving a conflict.

If anyone can't think of a character detail, use the Example Characters table ([§4.2](#)).

2.2.1 The Antagonist

*Write an **A** at the top-right of a blank card to distinguish this character.*

Motivated by a Sinister Goal. In addition to their summary, the Antagonist has a second sentence which summarizes the heinous ends they're trying to achieve.

Unbeatable. The Antagonist is incredibly powerful, and their defeat is inconceivable...

Doomed to fail. ...but the story nevertheless ends with them being defeated.

Use Lock-or-Change to determine the antagonist's name, summary, and Sinister Goal.

2.2.2 The Protagonist

*Write a **P** at the top-right of a blank card to distinguish this character.*

Guided by a Noble Value. In addition to their summary, the Protagonist has a second sentence which describes a virtue they embody.

Unstoppable. The Protagonist will always overcome whatever obstacles are put in their way. The Protagonist cannot be killed—or at least not permanently.

Destined to win. The Protagonist will go to any lengths to stop the antagonist from accomplishing their Sinister Goal, and will eventually succeed.

Use Lock-or-Change to determine the protagonist's name, summary, and Noble Value.

2.2.3 Supporting Cast: Allies and Minions

Loyal to a cause. Both the Protagonist and the Antagonist get by with a little help from their friends. Allies are characters who are loyal to the protagonist, while Minions are characters who serve the Antagonist.

*Write a lowercase **p** or **a** in the top-right corner to indicate loyalty.*

Loyalty can change. Allies can become Minions and vice versa at any time. When this happens, cross out the letter in the upper-right and write the new letter next to it.

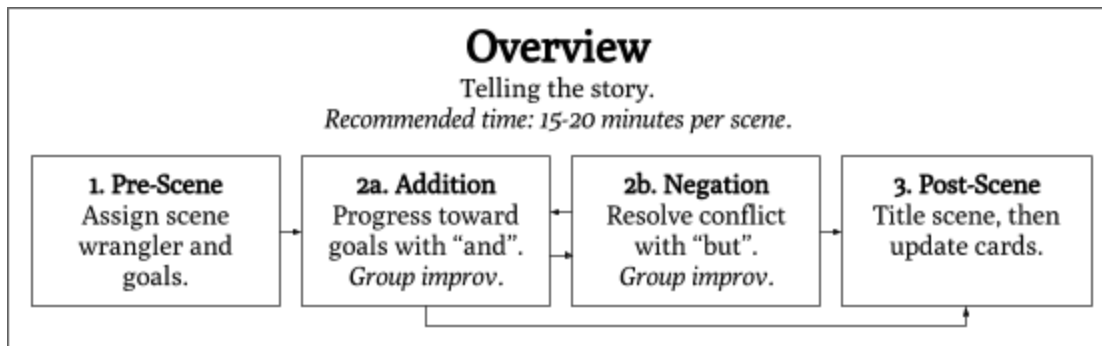
Minimize character paperwork during scenes. When a new character is introduced, have one person write their name down on a blank index card. When the scene is over, use Lock-or-Change to determine their character summary.

Here are some examples of what character cards might look like before play begins.

Lord Nefarious	A
<p>A hooded figure who operates from behind the scenes. Wants to use the Soul Gems to power the Iron Phoenix.</p>	

Francesca Q. Gimbal	P
<p>A half-elven gun-knight and champion of Eldrämck, the true Elvish Queen. She strives to uphold balance.</p>	

3. Scenes



The rest of the game proceeds as a series of freeform improvisational storytelling scenes.

Scenes have prophetic goals. Before beginning a scene, everyone will decide what the goals of the scene are. Goals are the high-level beats that will happen during the scene. Rather than being summaries of what will happen, they should be abstract enough that the way the goal is fulfilled is open to interpretation.

3.1 Beginning a Scene

Choose a scene wrangler to keep everything on track. Each scene, one player takes on the role of the scene wrangler. Their task is to decide the first goal, do the opening and closing narration for the scene, and try to steer the group back toward completing goals if it gets off-track. Players should rotate who wrangles, but be flexible. Have the scene wrangler start by writing the number of the next scene at the top of a blank index card.

Write a conflict on the scene card. The first goal of the scene must be a conflict which involves at least two characters, and may briefly mention how the conflict is resolved. Two conflicts are already predetermined:

- First Scene: One of the Antagonist's Minions is defeated by the Protagonist's Powers.
- Final Scene: The Protagonist defeats the Antagonist, thwarting their Sinister Goal.

Use Lock-or-Change to determine scene goals. Add goals to the scene card until every player has locked one goal or the scene wrangler says to stop.

If anyone can't think of a goal, use the Example Goals table ([§4.3](#)).

3.2 *Playing A Scene*

Don't stop for paperwork. During a scene, writing on cards should be minimal and unobtrusive. Write down brief notes for things if you need help remembering, but don't halt the narration if at all possible. When the scene ends, there will be a period to update any cards.

*Make a mode card by writing **and** and **but** on opposite sides of an index card.*

Use "yes, and" to progress the story. When the mode card shows *and*, the story should be moving forward. Each player can talk freely and assert something about the story as true, unless it involves a character whose card is being inhabited by someone else.

Use "yes, but" to resolve conflicts. When anything someone has asserted might be contested by another character, flip the mode card to *but*. At this point, each statement by a player should be about negating, reversing, or foiling the previous statement. When nobody has any more ideas, the conflict is resolved. Flip the mode card back over.

3.3 *Ending A Scene*

Wrap up and give it a title. When all of a scene's goals have been fulfilled, the scene wrangler should end it with some closing narration. Finally, the scene wrangler writes a title for the scene at the top of the scene card.

Update cards. Take a second to write a summary for any minions or allies that were introduced, as well as any new powers or limits.

3.2.1 Example Scene

Joseph, Holly, and Diego are playing together. Joseph volunteers to be the scene wrangler for their first scene in the game.

Joseph: Francesca has been tracking the wizard who stole the Soul Gem, and has finally come to a hermitage deep in the woods. She thinks she might be able to take the old man by surprise by being nice and feigning to just be someone passing through.

Holly: Yes, and she calls out a loud greeting and is met by Roosevelt, a kindly old man in a plain robe. He says, “Oh my, a guest! Come in, come in—would you like some tea?”

(Holly writes down “Roosevelt” at the top of a blank card.)

Diego: *(Taking Francesca’s card.)* “Absolutely! Do you have any black tea?”

Joseph: He shows Francesca inside, remembering the message from Lord Nefarious warning him that she would be coming after the Soul Gem. While pretending to add milk to the tea, he slips in a drop of poison!

Holly: *(Flipping the Mode card over from “and” to “but.”)* Conflict!

Diego: Yes, but her emotion vision lets her see Roosevelt’s oily hatred mixed into the tea! She throws the tea at the wizard, then draws her gun and shoots!

Joseph: Roosevelt conjures a magic shield that deflects the tea and the bullet!

Diego: But Roosevelt always yells out the names of his spells, so Francesca adjusts by doing a trick shot off the shield and wall to hit him from the side!

Holly: Not so fast! He yells “Teleport!” and vanishes in a puff of smoke... appearing right behind Francesca!

Diego: But he was too distracted from the ricochet to notice that Francesca backed up to the wall! Now he’s magically merged with the wall and stuck!

(Nobody has any ideas on how to get Roosevelt out of this pickle, so the conflict ends and the mode card flips over. All the scene’s goals have been completed, so Joseph says some closing narration and the game continues with a different scene.)

Here are some examples of what some cards might look like after a scene.

Scene 1: Frannie Get Your Gun

- A minion loyal to the Antagonist is defeated by the Protagonist's Power.

Francesca Q. Gimbal

P

A half-elven knight who serves Eldrämck, the true Elvish Queen. She strives to uphold balance.

enchanted pistol /
emotion vision /

Roosevelt

a

Wizard working for Lord Nefarious; nice guy, but a wallflower.

wizardry / yells out his spells

4. Examples

Gimme a number. Ask someone¹⁶ to pick a number between 1 and 48—add the corresponding result into the game if you're having trouble finding an idea.

4.1 Example Seeds

Places

1. a secret moon
2. an underground observatory
3. a sentient crystal planet
4. a magic consignment shop
5. dark art school
6. a sideways city
7. 3,959 miles underground
8. a baseball diamond

Types of Characters

9. demon architects
10. malfunctioning robots
11. wizard lords
12. magical spiders
13. infernal bureaucrats
14. soul couriers
15. queens of the mountain realm
16. sentient boats

Time

17. the week leading up to prom
18. winter

Stuff

25. the greatest treasures of all¹⁷
26. cursed un-mirrors
27. weaponized cosmic horrors
28. magical instruments
29. the prize behind door No. 3
30. reality fibers
31. plant-animal hybrids
32. a baseball-sized diamond

Types of Powers

33. shadow mutations
34. hedge magic
35. exquisite equitation
36. emotional visualization
37. very specific transmutations
38. ideology cannons
39. academic achievement
40. machine sorcery

Mood

41. cute
42. spooky
43. cool

¹⁶ You can also ask Siri to do this, or roll a d6 to pick a category and then a d8 to pick an item in that category.

¹⁷ Besides love and friendship.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| 19. eighty million years from now | 44. awkward |
| 20. the day after the war ended | 45. thirsty |
| 21. the ungilded era | 46. sparkly |
| 22. 1880 | 47. grim |
| 23. laundry day | 48. bizarre |
| 24. one year before The Ascension | |

4.2 Example Characters

Antagonist Name

1. Ronald Reagan
2. Kevin Blechdom
3. Daniel Deacon
4. Solenoid Pépin
5. Monad Megan
6. Money Pendant
7. Georgia O'Keeffe
8. Johnald Pregnant

Antagonist Detail

9. deeply curious
10. magnanimous
11. mild gluten allergy
12. embarrassed by obscenities
13. impeccably glamorous
14. student of architecture
15. humble to a fault
16. an excellent dancer

Antagonist's Sinister Goal

17. destroy The Golden Throne
18. assassinate Quing Wembley
19. assemble relic fragments

Protagonist Name

25. Janine Jaquette
26. Turnbow Turnip
27. Brenda Bresson
28. Enrique Ennis
29. Ferne Ferrera
30. Roosevelt Rohloff
31. Elinore Ellers
32. Ramon Rastad

Protagonist Detail

33. quick to anger
34. a hooligan
35. mistrustful
36. self-important
37. an excellent knitter
38. forgetful
39. earnest
40. ignorant

Protagonist's Noble Value

41. grace
42. benevolence
43. love
44. honor
45. beauty
46. knowledge

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------|
| 20. obliterate the western reaches | 47. justice |
| 21. reclaim <i>The Yamato</i> | 48. truth |
| 22. conquer the midlands | |
| 23. reach The West Pole first | |
| 24. break the vending machine | |

4.3 Example Goals

The protagonist...

1. gains a new Power
2. makes an impossible choice
3. is transformed
4. is temporarily stopped
5. makes a mistake
6. has an insight
7. makes a huge advance
8. takes an incredible risk

An ally...

9. shows up just in time
10. makes a sacrifice
11. gets separated
12. makes a promise
13. has a secret identity
14. is secretly a Minion
15. has a revelation
16. sets the group back

A power...

17. complements another
18. is super effective
19. behaves unusually
20. is the inverse of another
21. is the same as another
22. doesn't work
23. is unusable until the last second
24. changes into something new

The antagonist...

25. exploits a Noble Value
26. reveals one of their Powers
27. nearly defeats the Protagonist
28. defeats an Ally
29. overcomes their own Limits
30. escapes from a conflict
31. becomes warped
32. has a temporary setback

A minion...

33. returns unexpectedly
34. defeats themselves
35. is betrayed
36. gets overconfident
37. is unceremoniously defeated
38. realizes the error of their ways
39. takes something precious
40. sets a trap

A limit...

41. renders a Power useless
42. causes its owner's defeat
43. does not exist
44. has a workaround
45. is horse-related
46. affects someone else
47. is falsely communicated
48. becomes a kind of strength

Appendix 2: On The Internet, Nobody.

a game about magicians on the internet

Version: June 12, 2017

Things You'll Need

4 to 10 players—a small gang.

20 minutes of play time—give or take.

A deck of cards—well-shuffled and with 52 cards.

12 Joker cards—optional. The backs should match the rest of the deck.

About *On The Internet, Nobody*.

Each player will take on the role of a member of “Cauldron Comrades”—the most popular internet discussion forum for magic-users of all kinds. One human will additionally take on the role of the moderator of said forum.

Throughout the book, italicized text indicates text to be read aloud.

Who would like to be the moderator? If anyone has experience moderating a forum, maybe it should be them. Otherwise, any method we use to decide on someone is fine.

The moderator—and only the moderator—may turn the page.

These rules are for the moderator's eyes only. Do not share or discuss the rules on this or the next page—except to carry them out—with any other player until after the Conclusion.

Starting the Game

Distract the players while you stack the deck. Ask the players to close their eyes. Go through the deck and remove all the face cards¹⁸ from the deck, setting them aside. Loudly shuffle the rest of the deck—or just riffle the cards—as you read the following aloud:

I come to you all today with unfortunate news. As the forum administrator for www.cauldron.comrades, the internet's #1 community for magicians of every sort and caliber, it falls on me to inform you there are individuals in our midst who do not belong—pretenders to our arts who strive to glean our secrets.

We who bend the laws of the universe to our wills cannot allow these uninitiated individuals from the larger populace to lurk amongst us. On behalf of the forum leaders, we would ask that everyone go about their business, but please be wary and vigilant until we excise these undesirables from our community.

Place the set-aside face cards on the top of the deck when you're done. Set the deck in the middle of the table where everyone can reach it.

¹⁸ There should be twelve: Jack, Queen, and King in each suit. If you have the optional Joker cards, use those instead of the face cards.

Have players draw identity cards. Read this aloud:

You may now open your eyes. Draw a card from the deck and look at it. Your card is secret, and its suit corresponds to your identity for the rest of the game.

♠: *Sorcerers, sassy and strange.*

♦: *Druids, detached and disquieting.*

♣: *Conjurers, clever and quaint.*

♥: *Hedgewizards, humble and eccentric.*

However! If you have a face card or a Joker, know that you are only a pretender to that role—and so you are one of the false magicians who we seek to be rid of.

Make sure everyone understands their role before continuing, repeating anything above when needed.

Confirm the number of pretenders. Ask the players to close their eyes again. Then ask them to give a thumbs-up if they're a false magician.¹⁹ Lie to the players and tell them that there are two false magicians.²⁰

Begin discussion. End the game when the number of false magicians you said were present are removed, or when players unanimously abstain from voting for three turns. For the rest of the game, try to keep players on-topic and discourage them from engaging in excessive table talk. You may participate in discussions.

Turn the page and hand this book to another player.

¹⁹ If anyone doesn't put their thumb up, something went wrong. Tell the players there weren't enough false magicians and start over.

²⁰ If the group is playing the game again after the first time, mix up the number. It should typically be a quarter of the group, give or take, and one at minimum.

Playing the Game

Have a discussion. On each player's turn, they carry out one prompt from the list on the opposite page. In any order, each player must a.) freely discuss the prompt, or b.) put a finger to their lips to abstain from participating in the conversation. Once everyone has done so, proceed to the next step.

Players may make accusations. Have everyone except the moderator close their eyes. Players may point at another player to indicate that they think that player is a false magician.

Players accused by a majority are removed. If a majority of players vote for a player, the moderator should take that player's card from them.²¹ At this point, players may open their eyes again. Removed players may not speak, and only the moderator may know that player's true identity.

Proceed to the next player's turn. Hand the book to the next player so they may take their turn.

Ending the Game

The game ends when all the false magicians have been removed. As soon as the moderator informs the players that all the false magician have been removed from the forum, the game ends. Players may either a.) play the game again with a different moderator or b.) proceed to the conclusion on the last page.

²¹ In the case of a tie, the moderator acts as a tiebreaker.

The Roles

- ♠: Sorcerers, sassy and strange.
- ♦: Druids, detached and disquieting.
- ♣: Conjurers, clever and quaint.
- ♥: Hedgewizards, humble and eccentric.

Joker, Jack, Queen, or King: False magicians. The game ends when all present are removed.

Discussion Prompts

Choose one from the list, or ask someone to pick a number between one and seven. Fill in details as necessary.

1. You acquired an esoteric tome or grimoire. Describe which part you're having trouble understanding, then ask if anyone can help you out with it.
2. You accidentally signed a contract you shouldn't have. Describe how you were tricked into it, then ask if anyone knows how to annul it.
3. One of the arcane entities you consort with regularly hasn't been responding to you. Describe why you think they won't speak to you, then ask if anyone has advice.
4. You lost a duel or competition recently. Describe your opponent, then ask if anyone has advice for the rematch.
5. One of your tools recently broke. Describe the peculiar circumstances through which this happened, then ask if anyone knows how to fix it.
6. You found an odd magical item. Describe its curious properties, then ask if anyone knows what it does.
7. (Any other prompt of the player's creation.)

Conclusion

Read the following aloud:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.

— José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

The moderator should place the cards taken from removed players face-up on the table. The remaining players reveal their cards.

Any players who acted as moderators may now freely discuss the rules.

After discussing the rules, every player should—in any order—discuss why they are magical.

Appendix 3: Squad Force Heroes

a game of stylish heroism

Version: April 26, 2017

Things You'll Need

3 to 5 players—a small gang.

30 minutes of play time—give or take.

A deck of cards—well-shuffled and with 52 cards.

Blank index cards—one per player, and one extra.

Writing implements—one per player is ideal.

About *Squad Force Heroes*

This is a game inspired by television shows about squads of transforming superheroes—like *Power Rangers* or *Sailor Moon*. It's an improvisational storytelling game meant to be played in one sitting by a small group.

When all the players have gathered, read through this book aloud and play the game as you go. Italicized text indicates an action on the part of the person reading or the group.

Hand this book to the person on your left to read aloud.

Principles

These principles are put in place to bring coherence to the play experience. Read them aloud once at the beginning of the game. Over the course of play, any player should feel welcome to read them aloud again if they feel the game is moving away from the principles.

1. **The world is fake.** The story takes place in a universe where everything is made out of foam and rubber, and sometimes the strings are visible. Be corny, slapstick, over-the-top, and never resist the urge to make a one-liner.
2. **Be cinematic.** Think of the story you're telling like the one on a television show. Be visual and describe what's going on in terms of what the viewer might see—you're the cinematographer and the director.
3. **The heroes always win in the end.** The world in this story is highly simplified. There are only heroes and villains. The heroes always win, but never without a meaningful struggle.
4. **Ask each other questions to guide the fiction.** Because this game is a collaborative effort, it requires each player to take the reins of not only their own character but also the reins of the world at large. Ask each other guiding questions about details and let those establish the world.

Turn the page and hand this book to the person on your left to read aloud.

Creating The Squad

The group that everyone is part of is dedicated to fighting the forces of Darkness.

1. Every group is united through a **value** that they uphold above all else. The group's value becomes a figurative and literal weapon against the Darkness.

♠: Imagination

♥: Love

♦: Righteousness

♣:

Draw a playing card and write down the corresponding value on a single blank index card. If ♣ was drawn, come up with a new value as a group.

2. Your group has all manner of wondrous equipment at their disposal. It all follows a consistent visual **theme**.

Discuss the theme as a group and write it down on the index card. If there are any other important details the group would like to establish, write them down briefly.

3. And of course, every group has a name that strikes fear into the hearts of villains.

Come up with a name as a group and write it at the top of the index card.

Hand this book to the player on your left to read aloud.

Creating The Heroes

Each player takes control of a mighty superhero who transforms into someone capable of overcoming any obstacle.

1. Each hero has a **role** that defines how they combat the Darkness.

♠: Destroyer

♥: Restorer

♦: Defender

♣:

As a group, pick a name for the role associated with ♣. Each player writes down the four roles on a blank index card.

2. Your character transforms to become a great hero who fights against the Darkness. Certain visual characteristics set you apart from your teammates.

Tell the other players a little bit about your hero, in particular what color your costume is and how your outfit connects to the group's visual theme. Briefly write your answers down on your index card, but remember that what you say is more important than what you write.

3. What do your teammates call you?

Write your character's name down at the top of your character's index card.

Turn the page and hand this book to the player on your left to read aloud.

Episodes

Each episode is made up of a short series of improvisational roleplaying scenes. Players take turns taking actions to overcome a challenge as a superhero team that's already been formed. In other words: if this is the first time you're playing, you're playing the second episode, not the first.

Each episode should last about ten to twenty minutes.

Beginning an Episode

Play cards for the opening scene. Deal five cards to each player. Have each player put down the lowest card in their hand.

Establish the threat. The player who played the card with the lowest rank²² narrates the beginning of the episode, where this week's enemy reveals themselves. Use the suits below as a starting point:

- ♠: A devastatingly powerful foe.
- ♥: An old nemesis who has grown more powerful.
- ♦: An enemy that seems to be invincible.
- ♣:

Put the low-rank card in center of the table, with the other cards underneath it. This card now represents the Tension.

Turn the page and hand the book to the player on your left.

²² Ranks are Ace, 2, 3, and so on. An Ace has a value of 1. If there's a tie, draw cards from the deck until one shares a suit with someone's card. That person leads.

Playing an Episode

Each turn, a player chooses one of the following options based on their current role. Players start each episode untransformed, and so they have no role to begin. When you're done with your turn, hand the book to the player on your left.

No Role

Get caught in a pinch. Draw a card.

Narrate: An enemy looms over you or an innocent civilian. What stops you from acting?

Transform. Place a card in your hand on top of your character's index card. The suit of the card determines your powers, but you can always retransform if you change your mind or feel differently later.

Narrate: Say the special phrase you use to transform. How is your new role expressed visually?

Any Role

Get caught in a pinch. Draw two cards.

Narrate: You or your teammates are in a bad situation. How did you fail to embody your role?

Retransform. Place any card which is different in suit from your current Role on top of your Role card to overwrite it. If you played a face card, draw five cards.

Narrate: One or more facets of yourself change. What looks different about you?

Destroyer

Deal a mighty blow. Place any non-face card which is higher in rank than the Tension on top of the Tension card to overwrite it. Draw a card.

Narrate: You land a hit on your opponent, sending them reeling. What do you say to them?

Restorer

Lower the Tension. Place any card which is lower in rank than the Tension on top of the Tension card to overwrite it. Choose any number of players—they each draw one card.

Narrate: You heal or strengthen your teammates. What do you say to them?

Defender

Work with a teammate. Draw a card. Give a player a card from your hand.

Narrate: Through teamwork, you and a teammate survive an enemy assault. When the dust clears, what do you say?



Raise the Tension. Place any non-face card which is higher in rank than the Tension on top of the Tension card to overwrite it.

Narrate: You do something characteristic of your role. What cool thing do you say while doing it?

Overcome the threat. Play a face card from your hand. Every other player plays a card to support you.

If all the support cards are equal to or less than the rank of the Tension card—victory!

Narrate: Together you all summon up a new power which allows you to defeat this threat completely.

Turn the page and hand the book to the player on your left once the Episode has ended.

Otherwise, the Episode continues. Put the face card on top of the Tension. Discard the support cards.

Narrate: Your collective powers are insufficient. How do the forces of Darkness escalate in response?

Ending the Episode

Once the Episode has ended, collect all the cards and shuffle the deck.

Discuss as a group: were the forces of Darkness defeated for good?

If they weren't, the season continues. The game continues—play another episode.

If they were, the game ends.

If they weren't, but the group would like to finish playing, the game ends. Speculate what would happen over the rest of the season, or discuss why the show was cancelled.

Once the game has ended, turn the page and hand the book to the player on your left.

Concluding the Season

(Read the following aloud only once the group has decided to conclude the season.)

Each player flips over their character's index card. Draw a symbol for each of the four suits and leave some space to write next to them—just like the roles.

(Give everyone a moment.)

Instead of superhero roles, write down a sexuality next to each of the suits. You can confer with the other players if you like.

(Give everyone a moment.)

Privately, make a note of the role you inhabit currently, if any. Consider also any roles you've inhabited in the past, or may yet in the future. The game ends. Take the index card with you.

Appendix 4: Noons

two games about death on the frontier

Version: June 12, 2017

Things You'll Need

4 to 10 players—a small gang. This game will ask players to make simple gestures with their hands, and hold those gestures for an extended period of time.

20 minutes of play time—give or take.

Scraps of paper or index cards—optional.

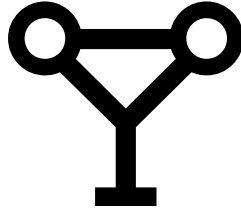
About Noons

This is a game in two parts. The two parts are meant to be played in one sitting, one after the other. The game as a whole is designed to be read aloud to the group and played one section at a time. There's no need to read ahead.

Italicized text indicates an action on the part of the person reading or the group.

Turn the page, then hand this book to the person on your left to read aloud.

Part I: The Showdown at Low Noon



It's eleven in the evening at The Dead Stallion.

In the corner there are a few people having a hushed conversation. A card game is in progress in the middle of the room. Several strangers stroll in through the saloon door and take a seat at the bar.

One hour until last call.

The bulge of a wooden stake under a leather vest. The glint of a brass badge in the candlelight. A toothy smile peeking out from under a dark hat.

At the stroke of midnight, a fight will break out. **The Showdown at Low Noon** is a game about answering the question: who participates, and who lives?

Turn the page, then hand this book to the person on your left to read aloud.

Let's Dance

There are three kinds of people in The Dead Stallion, each with a signature gesture:

Hunters have all kinds of tools that they employ in their craft of destroying the vile undead.

Make the gesture of the Hunter by crumpling your hand into a fist, as if holding tight a wooden stake.

Deputies tend to wear some sign of their office on their person, be it a badge or a silver revolver.

Make the gesture of the Deputy by holding out a flattened hand, as if saying "Stop!"

Vampires often cover themselves in dark clothing to hide their sickly-looking skin.

Make the gesture of the Vampire by making a peace sign, then curving your fingers to make a pair of fangs.

Each player will take on one of these roles for the rest of the game. When asked a question about yourself, answer as the particular character you're enacting would answer.

Every player makes a gesture²³ of their choice, keeping it concealed until instructed to reveal it.

The player who watched a movie depicting the life or death of a vampire most recently goes first.

Hand this book to the first player.

²³ Alternatively, players can write the name of their role down on an index card or piece of paper.

Criminal World

On your turn, carry out one action from the list below, then pass the book to the player on your left.

1. **Broadcast.** You do something to pass the time.

Narrate something your character does that everyone can see.

2. **Observe.** You examine someone from across the room.

Point to another player. Name something about that player's character you might be able to see and ask the other player to describe it.

3. **Interrogate.** You engage someone in conversation, opening yourself up in kind.

Point to another player. Ask their character a question. They can answer in any way, and then ask you a question in kind. Answer their question truthfully.

4. **Step Outside.** This may not be chosen on your first turn. Once one player chooses this, the bar closes and the characters all step outside. The next phase of the game begins.

Turn the page and hand the book to the person on your left to read aloud.

Midnight in a Perfect World

The last call has gone out, and the patrons all step outside.

Starting with the person holding this book and going to the left, carry out the following:

1. **Identify friends or foes.** Imminent danger lurks outside. Who is it coming from, and who has your back?

Point to another player. Tell them what you think they are and how you know that.

After everyone has made a claim, players all reveal their gestures.

There should be at least one Vampire and at least one Hunter present among the players. If this is not the case, start the game over from the beginning.

Hand the book to the player on your left.

Without You

On your turn, carry out the action that corresponds with your role, then pass the book to the player on your left.

1. **Hunters slay.** Hunters use the tools at their disposal to remove a Vampire from the world.

Point to a Vampire. Describe what you use to kill them. That player is removed from the game.

2. **Deputies kill.** Deputies draw their revolvers and kill on the spot.

Point to a Hunter or a Vampire. Describe who you save by shooting them. That player is removed from the game.

3. **Vampires feast.** Vampires devour the Hunters, bones and all.

Point to a Hunter. Describe what supernatural ability you use to destroy them. That player is removed from the game.

The game ends if a.) there are no Vampires in the game or b.) there are no Hunters. One of the living Vampires or living Hunters may give a rousing speech.

After the game has ended, players should decide if they would like to a.) play this game again from the beginning or b.) continue to Part II on the next page.

Part II: The Riot at High Noon



It's a few minutes before noon outside the Doodlebug.

A crowd is gathering. Curious eyes peer from behind closed blinds. Strangers stroll down a perimeter at the end of the street.

This silence won't last much longer.

Hastily-written banners. Shouts of dismay. The glint of a brass badge in the sunlight.

At the stroke of noon, violence will break out. **The Riot at High Noon** is a game about answering the question: who participates, and who lives?

Turn the page, then hand this book to the person on your left to read aloud.

Let's Dance

There are three kinds of people outside the Doodlebug, each with a signature gesture:

Bigots

Make the gesture of the bigot by crumpling your hand into a fist, as if holding tight a wooden bat.

Allies

Make the gesture of the ally by holding out a flattened hand, as if saying "Stop!"

Queers

Make the gesture of the queer by making a peace sign, as if to yearn for a life uncomplicated by oppression.

*Every player makes a gesture²⁴ corresponding with the one they had during the last game of *The Showdown at Low Noon*, keeping it concealed until instructed to reveal it.*

The player who watched a movie depicting the life or death of a queer person most recently goes first.

Hand this book to the first player.

²⁴ If players wrote their gestures down on paper, write the corresponding role on the other side of the paper.

Midnight in a Perfect World

Starting with the person holding this book and going to the left, carry out the following:

1. **Broadcast.** In uncertain and dangerous times, make your position clear.

Reveal your gesture. Tell the other players why you are what you are.

Once everyone has spoken, turn the page and hand the book to the player on your left.

Without You

On your turn, carry out the action that corresponds with your role, then pass the book to the player on your left.

1. **Bigots**

Point to a queer. That player is removed from the game.

2. **Allies**

Point to a bigot or a queer. That player is removed from the game.

3. **Queers**

Point to a bigot. That player is removed from the game.

The game ends if a.) there are no queers in the game or b.) there are no bigots. One of the living queers or living bigots may give a rousing speech or a somber memorial.

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