



Game by Denis J. Chagnon, 13 Sept. 2006

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StoryGames Reverse\Engineering 2006 Edition

## : A Game System

Authored by Denis J. Chagnon, 13 Sept. 2006


Original Character Sheet by Graham Walmsley

Part of the StoryGames 2006 Reverse Engineering Challenge

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### **Anthologies, Stories, Scenes, Conflicts, Actions, & Narration:**

Let's start with a brief overview of the basic structure of the game, to give you a sense of the narrative framing this system is designed to work toward. We'll get into the mechanics of how to determine results when they're up in the air, how to determine who should narrate each particular piece of the fiction, how to develop the setting and the characters, and who should control which pieces in later sections. For now, we'll use a wider lens. (Think of this as the storyboard, rather than the script.)

An overall game under the  system consists of an **Act**, or of a series of connected Stories (which form an **Anthology**). **Stories** are collaborative fictions which are jointly created by all the players. The genre, tone, themes, and so on of the Act are a separate issue from the mechanics themselves, but an important one, and the mechanics can both inform and be informed by those rules; the players should have a clear consensus before beginning a story about the general tone and genre they are looking to create.

Within a given Act, the players will frame, resolve, and play out any number of **Scenes**. A Scene is a particular piece of the narration, in which one or more **Characters** (the major personas, protagonists or antagonists, which the players control in the shared fiction) have particular goals they are attempting to accomplish. Those goals for the Scene are the Scene's **Stakes**; the Players involved should negotiate the Stakes between them so that they make sense, though for an involved Scene they may need to remain relatively flexible goals. Good fiction is driven by opposition: if a Character's goals aren't met by opposition or risk, either from another Character or from the environment, the Scene probably isn't worth playing through and should be simply narrated or glossed over.

If there *is* something of importance going on, however, and there's uncertainty about how it will (or should) all turn out, it's time for some **Conflicts**. There might be one or more Conflicts in a given Scene, depending on how long the Scene lasts. Each Conflict involves at least one Character, who has a definite outcome in mind for the Conflict – the Conflict's Stakes, once again negotiated between the players involved – which brings him towards his larger goal for the Scene. There might be multiple Characters in competition for the same outcome, or with opposing, mutually exclusive outcomes, or a Conflict could consist of a single Character against some factor of the environment or a non-central character (ie, not a protagonist/antagonist).





In the second case – Character vs. “furniture” – the Conflict is likely to consist only of a single **Action**, the mechanics of the game which resolve whether the character attains her desired outcome or not, the approach to the situation she used, and what led to her success or failure. (In fact, for some Scenes of this sort, the entire Scene could consist of a single Conflict which rests on a single Action – it all depends on how the players frame the situation.) An Action has Stakes of a sort, but they're really about whether and how the player involved makes more progress (or doesn't) toward their Conflict or Scene Stakes. Once the mechanics give you a rough skeleton, one (or more) of the players then **Narrates** the actual results to fit those parameters, and you move on to the next Action, Conflict, or Scene, as appropriate. We'll get to how to determine the results of Actions and tips on how to narrate them soon; there's one other type of Conflict to address first.





The first of the two types of Conflict – Character vs. Character – is often the more complicated of the two, as it typically carries more dramatic weight. The Actions serve to determine which of the Players involved makes more progress toward her Stakes for the Conflict or Scene. There might, again, only be one Conflict to the scene, or there might be a series of them, depending on how much narrative focus the players want to give to the Scene, but in either case there's likely to be more than one Action in the Conflict, as the players decide how to out-manuever the opponent(s) and how much they're willing to risk to attain their desired outcomes, and through them the overall goals they have. Each Action, all the players involved determine their approach to the Conflict for this stage, and compare their results to determine who gains the upper hand for that Action. Narrate that stage of the Conflict (the Action), limit further options as needed, and move on to another round of Action until one player is out of options, or decides to Give for that Conflict (presumably, to save that Character's resources for a later Conflict in that Scene).



To play through a Story, you'll need copies of the Character Sheet at the end of these rules; one for each of the Characters (and possibly more, if there's a Player who's portraying all the Antagonists – more on this later). You're likely to want copies of the Cards at the end of the rules, also, though there are other ways to handle that. And lastly, you'll want some way of marking progress on the character sheets from Action to Action, Conflict to Conflict, and Scene to Scene. I recommend using small tokens of some sort – glass beads, dice that you can change the number on, or something that lets you still see the important information on the sheet – or just making and erasing marks on the sheet in pencil.

### **The Four Methods**

To resolve, not to mention to excitingly narrate, an Action, you need to know how the Character(s) in question are approaching the Action, and how those approaches interact with everything else that's going on. It's not particularly interesting to know that Gerald the Brown made his way past the guard and into the Majordomo's chambers to get a look at the secret documents, or that Don Javier Rioja wooed the Baroness. At least, it's not particularly interesting compared to knowing that Gerald fought his way past, or convinced the guard to let him pass, or that he thought of another way in which wasn't guarded, or any of a whole lot of other possibilities, or that Javier danced the night away with her, impressed her with his musical talent, or even simply exchanged just the right sort of smoldering glances. Even those are dull compared to knowing the intricate details, the ins and outs of the fight or the possible consequences of the actions, as long as the scene has enough importance for that level of detail.

For the purposes of this system, there are four possible **Methods** to use at any given time. These are represented by the four icons, , , , and . They're purposefully somewhat vague, and a given Action could conceivably be accomplished through any of the four, depending on the Narration. (Since the Narration follows after you determine the results, that shouldn't pose a problem. A challenge, maybe, but an interesting one.) What do these four represent?

 is: logic, rhetoric, knowledge, convincing, academics, information, discussion.  is the cerebral pursuits, the brain, the intellect. If it falls in the domain of the mind, it's probably something to do with .  is Gerald the Brown recalling the guard's habits to find a gap to exploit or convincing the guard it's in his best interests to let Gerald through, and Javier impressing the Baroness with his knowledge over dinner, and so on.

 is: movement, exertion, combat, nimbleness, might, physicality.  is the sphere of the body, the sort of thing where it comes down to flesh, muscle, and

bone. If you can imagine that you'd be breathing hard or hardly breathing while doing it, it's likely to be a ⚡ approach to the action. ⚡ is Gerald drawing a knife and attacking the guard, and Javier sneaking quietly past the Baron in the shadows or outrunning the Baron's men if that first plan failed, for instance.

🎵 is: creativity, artistry, doing the unexpected, novelty, adaptability, panache. 🎵 is performance, or thinking outside the box, or creation of something new and insightful. If it involves the character using her imagination, there's a good chance it's 🎵. 🎵 is Gerald deciding to climb the outside of the tower instead of going past the guard, or concocting a ruse, disguise, or distraction, and it's Javier serenading the Baroness from below her window or besting the Baron in a duel through his unorthodox maneuvers.

❤️ is: willpower, faith, determination, perseverance, stamina, resolve, sheer force of personality. ❤️ is getting through based not so much on the action itself, but on the force behind it. If it's the sort of thing that tends to show a character's "heart," it tends to be a ❤️ way of resolving things. While it might seem like this would be more of a reactive or defensive Method, a response to someone else's acts, it doesn't have to be. ❤️ is Gerald simply waiting out the guard by holding stock still just out of sight until the guard finally nods off or blustering his way in by sheer intimidation, and Javier composing relatively poor poetry, but so *earnestly* that the Baroness is convinced, or giving her those long, smoldering looks with his dark, mysterious eyes until she can't help but meet his gaze and begin to consider...

A quick recap: 🧠 is mind, ⚡ is body, 🎵 is imagination, and ❤️ is heart. Just about every possible approach to a particular Action can be classified as one of these four Methods. Often, in fact, more than one Method seems right for a given description – but again, since you Narrate after you find the results, that's less likely to be a problem. Pick a Method to approach the action with that appeals to you; you can worry about the details later on, though it never hurts to have them in mind and to offer up a brief description as you declare your Method.

## **Understanding & Using the Character Sheet and the Cards**

The character sheet for 🧑 consists of a four-by-four square, with the four methods in red along the top and in gray down the right-hand side. Go take a look at it now. This grid gets filled in with numbers (1 through 8); we'll get into how to determine those in a later section (or you could skip ahead). Higher numbers represent stronger interactions than lower numbers. The columns – reading down from the red Methods – each reflect the Character that sheet represents using that Method to accomplish her Action. The rows – reading across from the gray Methods – represent either the opposition's chosen Method,

in the case of a Conflict between Characters, or the nuance, obstacle, or complication a Character faces, when he's interacting with the environment rather than another major Character. The remainder of the sheet's space is there for notes, comments, and other such development of the character.

The game's structure is such that, even if a character is largely quite competent in one of the Methods, at least one possible sort of opposition will be a weak point. Not only does this help make for more interesting characters – providing features and idiosyncrasies to develop a character's persona around – but it also makes the mechanical portion of the game more interesting, less deterministic and more of a rock-paper-scissors feel, with an element of strategy. We'll explore how the sheet itself is set up a little later on (how to create a Character, in other words). For now, look at the example – while ⚡ might seem to be her best approach, it's particularly weak for her when her opponent is using 🗨️. Perhaps, while she's a rather physical sort, able to handle herself in a fight, she's a little too easy to talk down from one for her own good. Or perhaps it's another explanation entirely; that's the sort of element you'll develop through play. Meanwhile, her 🎵 is relatively middle-of-the-road all the way across – she's never likely to excel with it, but neither does it have a glaring weak point.

What this means in the back-and-forth of play is that, even if you've opposed a given opponent enough times to already have a sense of his strengths and weaknesses, there's an in-game guessing game about what course of action to pursue and, as we'll see, a balancing of risks and logic.

In addition to the character sheet, you'll find two sheets of cards. These will eventually be sized to print out onto standard perforated business card stock; for now, you can just print them out and cut them up. You don't actually *need* the cards, if you've got a standard 6-sided die or some other way of generating random numbers 2 through 7 and some other method for the players to indicate their chosen actions. On each card appears an icon for one of the Methods (three of each), and a number (2 through 7, twice each). The numbers and the Methods don't have any connection to each other; they're used separately, but this way one set of 12 cards is all a few players – up to three easily, more with sharing – will need. Feel free to print off more copies, too, if you've got the cardstock. You'll use the Methods on the cards in Character vs. Character Conflicts, and both types of information from the cards in Character vs. "Furniture" Conflicts or Conflicts involving more than two Characters.

### **Resolving an Action: Character vs. Character**

In a Conflict between two or more Characters, you'll go through a series of Actions until only one Character is left, either because her opposition has

exhausted all their options completely (which is unlikely, as they'll have to save some for the rest of the Scene) or because her option has decided to **Give In** for that particular Conflict, count their losses, and move on, possibly to a follow-up set of Stakes that builds on or offsets the previous Conflict.

For each round of Actions, each Character involved gets a chance to declare the one Method that they're using. As the Conflict (and the Act as a whole) progresses, their options will likely become limited – see below for more – but for now we'll keep it simple. Each of the Players directing a Character in the Conflict should decide and commit to one of the Methods that are open to them (initially, all four). The simplest is for the Player to choose one of the Method cards and hold it face-down, representing the general approach to the situation that Character will be using for this Action.

Once both the Characters have chosen a Method, reveal their choices. You can narrate a little bit of the Character's part of the action now, or you can wait until you've checked the results to be able to coordinate that in; do whatever feels more comfortable and produces a good story for you. I'd recommend waiting to see the results first, but there's admittedly a certain dramatic tension in not knowing how it'll turn out in the early rounds.

On your sheet, read DOWN the column that starts with the RED Icon of the Method you've picked (or the dark one, if your sheet's in black-and-white), and look for the row that matches the GRAY Icon your opponent picked. This square will contain a number, 1 through 8, which corresponds to your strength in this particular Action. Your opponent will do the same, but with *their* Method in the *column* of their sheet, and your Method in their *row*. The higher number will take the upper hand for this Action – the Player with the lower number should think for a moment about the Stakes, briefly describe his Character's actions, words, thoughts, and so on to reflect the situation, and then turn it over to the winner of the round to allow her to finish the Narration with respect to the characters. The winner needs to remember that, unless the loser decides to Give In, the Conflict isn't over yet – you can make progress toward the Stakes, and make Narration challenging for your opponent, but don't go too far too fast. Keep it interesting.

There's more information on this below, in the section on Exhaustion, Consequences, and Giving In, but in short, the loser will have his options for the next Action constrained a little bit – he'll have to pick a different Method next round, and depending on the situation and how far he's pushed it, he might not be able to use that Method again this Conflict, this Scene, or even this Story. (Remember, though, that how far to push is always under your control as a Player – you can always choose to Give In, it just depends how badly you want the Stakes you've set.)

If neither Player is ready to Give In yet, after you apply the consequences, move on to another round of Actions.

### **What if there's more than two Characters involved?**

That depends on how it breaks down.

If there are still just two sides, but there's more than one Character on one side and only one on the other, the Player that's being ganged up on chooses a Method for each of his opponents (they can be different, or the same); determine the results of each of those as if they were separate Actions, but in the end there's only one Narration for the whole Action. If the lone Character suffers Exhaustion, it's only applicable to that particular opponent, though Consequences for the Conflict, Scene, or Act affect all of a Character's Actions.

That's the simplest case. It's also a case where the defender has a definite strength, but that's deliberate – it's in the interests of a compelling story, usually, for a Conflict to be a situation where the outcome matters, and is at least somewhat uncertain. If it's not dramatically important, don't take it all the way to the mechanics.

The next easiest case is a free-for-all, where there are more than two characters but, in the long run, only one Character can get their Stakes for the Conflict – in other words, everyone's on their own side. In a free-for-all, there's nobody to watch your back, so you might get caught unawares. On the first Action of a Conflict like this, all the Players involved should generate a random order for their Characters to declare targets in – pick cards, roll some dice, whatever works best for you, as long as it's fair, random, and the result is a clear order.

Each of the Characters then picks who they're going to focus on this round – in the order determined, go around and ask. Don't worry yet about what sort of action they're taking; that will come next – just know that each Character gets one Method each round of Action, not one per opponent. Two Characters that are focusing on each other are on an even footing; each of those pairs goes first, picking their Method simultaneously as if they were the only two involved. When you don't have someone directly focused on you, you're a little better off; in the same order the Characters picked targets in, they should pick their chosen Method for the Action. Once everyone's got a Method and a target, compare each of the numbers in pairs; if you win all your pairings, you come out without any setbacks, otherwise you're going to face some Exhaustion, at the very least. In other words, a free-for-all is quicker to play out than several single combats (in number of Actions, anyhow), since more Characters are going to be suffering setbacks each time around.

In future rounds, you'll go in order of the lowest result each player got the previous round, from the lowest of those to the highest – break ties by keeping Players in the same order (relative to each other) as they were the round before. That is, if last round went (from first pick to last, with their results shown) Albert (5,7), Betty (8,3), Xena(4,3), Yuri (7), and Zoe (6), next round's order would be Betty, Xena, Albert, Zoe, then Yuri.

If there's a few Characters on each side, it's a little more complicated. Basically, treat it as a free-for-all as above, except that once targets have been picked for a round, split it into one-on-one and one-on-many combats, as appropriate. Again, Exhaustion only relates to a given opponent, but Consequences for a Conflict, Scene, or Act applies to all opponents.

### **Resolving an Action: Character vs. "Furniture"**

Much easier in a lot of ways than a Conflict between Characters, sometimes it's dramatically interesting to know whether, or how, a Character gets past some obstacle or difficulty that's not represented by a full Character's grid sheet. (And remember, if it's not interesting or it doesn't matter, don't spend the time bringing it all the way to an Action – negotiate a Narration past it, and move on to a more interesting Scene.)

In that case, you'll need a target number – a difficulty, generally between 2 and 7. If there's a clear consensus (or one of the Players has been given the authority to make all those decisions – if there's one person running the Story and playing all the antagonists as a Game Master, for instance), you can simply pick this number; if it's unclear, or the element of unpredictability is important, you can draw a card for the number.

After that, the Player involved in the Action picks her Method. Once she's done so – indicating the general approach she wants to use – pull a random Method from the deck of cards (or generate one some other way). That random Method is used as the opponent's (gray) Method when determining the outcome; find that result and determine whether it's greater than, tied with, or lower than the target number.

If it's greater, the Player should Narrate her Character overcoming the obstacle and gaining her Stakes for the Conflict. Bring the "opposing" Method into the narration as well, whether it's as a complication she managed to overcome or as a nuance to her approach.

If the Player's result is less than the target number, she's failed; she can begin the Narration as if it were a Character-on-Character conflict, but another player (the Game Master if there is one, or the player sitting to her right if there isn't,

make good defaults for this if there's not another clear choice) should finish the Narration. Give In, or take a Consequence and try a different Method, as if you'd lost a round of a Character Conflict.

In the case of a tie, well... there's a minor setback. Exhaust the Method you chose for that round, and move on into another. (Unless you just want to Give In, but really – what fun is that?)

### **Exhaustion, Consequences, and Giving In**

When you lose an action with a particular Method, you've Exhausted or face Consequences in that Method. What happens depends on how many, and what kinds, of marks (or tokens) it already has in its column on your sheet.

If it's got no marks in its column yet, you've just Exhausted it for the moment – put a mark or token at the bottom of its column on your sheet, and pick a different Method for the next round. You can still come back to this Method later, as long as it only has one mark in its column when you do so.

If it's got one mark in its column already – either an Exhaustion as above, or some form of longer-term Consequences – and you lose with that Method again, you're going to need to place another mark, and it's going to result in Consequences. Using that Method again, at least for this Conflict, is going to be costly and difficult, for as long as there are at least 2 marks in its column (see below).

The first time you take Consequences, they're going to be Conflict Consequences, and they'll last as long as the Conflict you're currently resolving does. (Effectively, they're Conflict-level Exhaustion.) Place a mark at the top of the column to represent this – while it's there, that Method's values are all reduced by 1 for you.

If you've already got Conflict Consequences, the next Consequences you take will be Scene consequences. Place another mark at the top of that Method's column – distinguish it either by color, or by shape (perhaps letter?), or somehow, from a Conflict Consequence, since you'll remove the Conflict Consequence sooner. Again, while it's there, that Method is at -1 for you; feel those options starting to get limited yet?

If, despite already having Exhaustion and both Conflict and Scene Consequences, you're willing to keep trying that Method, and lose with it again, you're going to have to take Act Consequences. Make a third (or more – see below) mark at the top, again distinct from the other two, and take another -1 penalty to that column while it's up there. Hopefully it was worth the effort!

Once there are two marks in a column, whether they're one Exhaustion and one Consequence or two or more Consequences, you need to place a new mark in that column (and thus more Exhaustion or Consequences) **every time you use that Method, whether or not you win.** It's pretty rare that you'll be willing to push that hard, but some Stakes are worth the risk.

There's no limit to Act Consequences until they bring one of the boxes in that column below 1 on their own. If the lowest number in the column is a 3, you can have 3 Act Consequences on that column, for example, before you're not allowed any more and can't use that Method under any circumstances.

Remember, at the end of any Action, once you've taken your Exhaustion or Consequences, you can always yield the Conflict's stakes and Give In; you don't have to keep racking up the Consequences unless you want to. In fact, if you've got some reason to, you can even Give In if you *won* the most recent round, as long as the Action is all finished before you end (or bow out of) a Conflict. If there are other people still involved when you Give In, you're out of the running – sit back and watch the rest of the Conflict, since you're no longer in the contest, and are neither a valid target nor a participant.

And lastly – if you're taking consequences, work it into the Narration somehow. This is the sort of detail that really spices up the tale you're telling together.

### **Clearing up Consequences**

At the end of a Conflict, clear out all your Exhaustion marks and all of your Conflict-level Consequences, as you've got time to recover from them, catch your breath, relax from the stress, or whatever. Leave any Scene or Act Consequences, though – those are sticking around.

Similarly, once you wrap up a Scene, remove all the Scene Consequences from your sheet – this is why related followup Conflicts probably best belong in the same Scene even if some of the physical setting elements change, since the Stakes aren't really settled yet. More on this below.

And lastly, of course, when you reach the end of an Act. Come to a consensus with your fellow Players (or, if you've delegated authority to one Game Master, go with her direction) about whether you're removing all the Act Consequences, or just one, from your sheet. (Usually all, unless you're ending the Act on a cliffhanger or some other unfinished business.)

### **Resolving Scenes and Moving On**

Once you've wrapped up a Conflict and settled its Stakes, move on – see if there's another Conflict that it makes sense for the Scene to have before you set

a new one. In general, if there's a followup Conflict that directly builds on a previous one, particularly without time to recuperate from the last Conflict in between (and that span of time can be a nebulous thing), and it builds toward the same, bigger Stakes that the previous conflict did – the Scene's Stakes – then it should be part of the same Scene. Otherwise, it's time to remove any Scene-length Consequences you've got, and move on to the next Scene.

Once all the Scenes for a given Act – which generally should be paced to fill one session's play, for decent pacing and for ease of bookkeeping – are finished, wrap it up as feels appropriate. It might be part of a larger Anthology, in which case you might want to make changes to the Characters to reflect how this Act developed them, or it might well stand on its own. It's up to you and your fellow Players.

### **Creating Characters**

When you're creating a character, you need a result that's got strengths and weaknesses; without them, it's going to be a relatively uninteresting story. To that end, for most purposes, the main characters – protagonists and any major antagonists meant to be at their level – should be built as outlined below. For particularly minor or major characters, most likely antagonists, feel free to vary from this structure, but keep that overall goal in mind.

Start with a blank sheet. Put your Character's name in that box up there whenever feels appropriate, and feel free to write in anything that helps you visualize the character outside that blue box at any point in this process.


Next, fill in the 16 squares you've got with the following numbers:

1 2 2 3 3 4 4 4 5 5 5 6 6 7 7 8

There's only one rule about how you're allowed to fill in those numbers – there's a maximum total you've got to keep from going over in any row or any column. For most games, a total of 22 is a good one (though this might need some more playtesting) – there's the possibility of three or even all four traits above the midpoint, but either one will be a distinct weakness, or they'll all be just a bit above the middle.

Once you've got the strengths and weaknesses where you like them, go ahead and flesh out the Character's story a little. Give a brief introduction to your fellow players, and you're good to go!

## Design Notes

The twin masks of tragedy and comedy which are this game's name -  - are, in the ancient Greek they date back to, called *prosopa* (literally, masks), hence the filename. While I like the term itself, I decided to use the symbol rather than the word to further embrace Graham's design of the character sheet entirely in the Webdings font.

This is really only the first draft of the system – I'd like to flesh it out with more examples, potential settings, and so on, to refine the system through playtest and work the bugs out of it, and last but not most definitely not least to work on the graphic design and layout. I'm hoping this reaches the final form I'm envisioning soon, as I think it's got the potential to be a really interesting final document. Let's just say that right now, even with all the material I hope to add, the word count in this document is far, far longer than I'd like it to be.

Lastly, I'd like to thank Graham Walmsley for his sheet design that inspired this system in my brain, Kevin Allen Jr. for coming up with such a great competition idea that was fun at both levels, Andy Kitkowski for the StoryGames forum it was concocted on, and all my talented fellow designers whose work clearly influenced my understanding of game design and Story Gaming particularly.

Empty rectangular box for text input.



Large blue rectangular area containing a 4x4 yellow grid.

