



Structures of TTRPG Practice

The methodological, orderly conduct of TTRPG practices.

Abstract

Tabletop Roleplaying Game (TTRPG) is a recreational activity where a host (Game Master, GM) must orchestrate the activity in-session. When the order of the session is not maintained, chaos among participants will plague the play and intervene with the meaningful progression of the session. Breaths are wasted on flourishing word-play and lavish exposition over details which lacks pragmatic meaning. Turning a roleplaying game into a glorified chess-kabuki hybrid. Participants will beg to benefit from a framework of methodology a which may maintain order when playing a TTRPG. When a competent GM progresses the gameplay of a TTRPG session through a methodological approach, this will propel a rhythmic pattern that ultimately increases the ample enjoyment of meaningful play conducted. Thus taking greater advantage of roleplaying-games as an interactive medium.

Granted, what is presented in this paper is but a suggestion for an underlying framework and is in no form prescriptive despite being written in a prescriptive style. This document merely serves as a guideline that a GM may find helpful when planning and running their next game. In practice, an experienced GM will have, by intuition, be employing a similar, if not alternate form of the methods described here. In this document, I attempted to formalise two frameworks of TTRPG gameplay structure. The former describes a scene-by-scene approach catering to role-play activities; the latter describes a variant of the traditional crawling approach found commonly among the Old School Renaissance (OSR) style of play.



Foreword:

These two gameplay structures are cross-complementary and primarily act as an internal reference for my own use. I must declare that my rendition of the methods are in no form prescriptive (even if it is written that way). Please treat this as a personal brain dump. m(_ _)m

The writings in this document are a proof of concept. Nothing is really implemented as a usable formal system, but the skeletons are there. Most of the examples used in these documents are either from my other writings, or from existing formal systems. This document on gameplay structure is for enthusiasts already interested in the RPG design scene. The motivation is to formalise the intricate features of running an **‘purposeful, rigidly structured’ TTRPG game**. Whereas in practice, a majority of ideas discussed in this document are commonly implicitly acknowledged by any GM.

This document presents two TTRPG-play structures inspired from many sources. I simply aggregated these snippets of rulings, adjusted them to my taste, added some of my ideas and organised them in a presentable form. I wonder if I can proudly claim it's “All me~” ... But I hope I have made a meaningful contribution to the melting pool of RPG design ideas with this document.

Some notable sources:

- kjdives
- Arnold .K
- TabletopTerrors
- TtheWriter

F.E.A.R's SRS document that they use across all of their products is a major influence in the writing of the fantasia gameplay structure.

OSR is the primary influence of the crawling gameplay structure. The ideas in the old school scene are already there, I simply reimagined it in my preference. Hence, you'd see that the second part of the document that discusses this will feel more like a playable formal system than the first part.

— Hao Lin, DumplingIsNice

**Two gameplay structures presented here are sequential in practice, but only the Fantasia gameplay structure is capable of constructing a spacial-temporally dexterous story across scenes.*



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Fantasia TTRPG Gameplay Structure (Scene by Scene)

A methodological, orderly process of collaborative storytelling. And to Roleplay.

Aim: To define an **abstract** organised methodology in the flow of playing TTRPG sessions in the Fantasia theatre/stage play fashion.

Hence, all methodology introduced in this document is intended for refinement in detail (with different implementations under different formal systems).

What is a Gameplay Structure in TTRPG? Part 1/2.

To begin a TTRPG game, a player must identify **The Experience** they plan to simulate. Then, develop a concept of the type of plot, setting, and style of play they aim to conduct. Then, select the most appropriate formal system to facilitate the experience in practice.

The GM then takes on the responsibility to direct the game to fruition. To do so, the GM will facilitate the player's roleplaying experience through a flow of TTRPG gameplay: The step by step process of which a TTRPG is conducted. The flow of gameplay and roleplay is how the TTRPG sessions are structured and executed in practice. Essentially the gameplay structure of the said game.

It is very important that no matter the amount of freedom is granted to the interpolation, freeform and automacy in roleplaying, a structured, step by step methodology is necessary to maintain order.

*When everyone is the author, no one is THE author. Therefore, to avoid chaotic game-session, an orderly fashion of play during a game-session is needed to mediate cross-talk and build a common ground (**common canon**) to agree to play the game on. Thus, establishing a single conclusive turnabout of events in the told story despite multiple contributions.*

However, the means and methods to do so vary wildly depending on application, goals and personal preference. This part will describe how the Fantasia Theatre/Stage-play style TTRPG game is conducted in a methodological fashion.



Fantasia

***Fantasia** is a free composition of a mixture of different forms and styles.*

This philosophy is reflected in the TTRPG practice of collaborative storytelling, where each player contributes their fraction of telling (**personal canon**) to the overarching story told (**public canon**). Order and standards are maintained by the GM, who directs, adjudicates and intermediate the tellings.

*For example, it is commonly assumed that a player's character belongs exclusively to that player to use, but this is untrue. Through sharing a character, the character gains life in the eyes of the **common canon**. No longer is the character pitched out in the public the same character in the **personal canon** of the creator; nor can the creator claim sole ownership or the rights to that character. Under the common canon directed by the GM, every member of the TTRPG game party has the right to interpret and portray a character or event. The image of a character in a piece of fiction is convincingly grounded in the collective awareness of the group when the consistent personal canons of a player matches the common canon between all players. Thus, breathing life to a character across the story told amongst this group of people who are immersed in the same common canon.*

The principles of Fantasia extends to other elements such as settings, plot, paratexts and meta-tellings of topics surrounding the game.

Breath of Life

Ideally, a character is considered to have been “Breathed Alive” when every participating member in a collaborative storytelling experience knows without argument; the appropriate response that character would give to a stimulation element in alignment with their persona, characteristics, and agenda. It is then, by the breath and words of all tellers, the character lives in their fiction.

However, for the purpose of order, creative control is assumed to be confined to the creators and their respective characters.



Glossary

General

General	
TTRPG:	Acronym for either: • Tabletop Role-playing Games • Tabletalk Role-playing Games
Tabletop:	A physical artefact in Reality that the TTRPG game takes place in. It is the space that the Players inhabit and interact with other players to practise TTRPG and converse. Nowadays, this artefact can be (cybernetically) virtual and imaginary.
Game:	An instance of overarching activity of practising TTRPG to play out a Story informed by a formal system. Players Play a Game that Plays over Sessions.
Session:	A single Play of the Game . Typically of 2-3 hour duration. A session of play covers <u>as much of the Story's development as allowed</u> and does not necessarily cover a specific amount of Scenes or Acts or Arc .
Play(s):	1. Verb: Engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation, amuse oneself by engaging in imaginative pretence, be cooperative, perform on, or represent (a character/role) in a theatrical performance. 2. Noun: A single or a sequence of Scenarios undertaken for a Game instance, typically during a Session. Can span across sessions, disjointed GMs, Players and PCs as long as the game instance is considered unfinished.
Formal System (Ludos):	The system of methodological approach to something. In TTRPG, it is a series of rules used to guide, inform and enact an experience.
Participant (Participating Member)	Participants are all people and organisations in Reality who are involved in a TTRPG game in any form.
	This is a collective term used to refer to such groups and members.
	Player: Members who are practising and participating in a TTRPG Game. Players are participants in the game that sit at a Tabletop and converse. Players typically create an avatar, a Player Character (PC) to roleplay as within an imagined world. The player makes Tellings of the Story, typically involving



	their PC. However, the Canonology of the act is adjudicated by the Game Master (GM).
	Party:
	Group of Players. Excluding the GM.
	Game master (GM):
	The Player with authority over the Fiction and the Game. This player is responsible for directing the Story, adjudicating the Tellings, constructing the Common Canon (merging the Personal and Public Canon), acting as the host of the Public Canon, the role of the World and intermediating for the Players as a link to the Fiction. Acting as the host of the Game, the GM manages the operations of a game and its derivative responsibilities. This includes but is not limited to: • Runnings of a session. • Facilitation of site (tabletop). • Mediatory of conflict. • Maintains laws and regulations (rules and etiquette). • Accountable respondee of the group's activities. Acting the role of the World, the GM holds intimate authority over the Fiction, the Story told, the Public Canon and the application of the Formal System. No Player can or should overturn a GM's decision, except the GM themselves. A GM is also a Referee, but a referee might not be the GM or the host. The GM may create Non-Player Characters (NPC) controlled by the GM to help populate and facilitate the game's Fiction. <i>The GM meditates and adjudicates the game. If the players are the actors in a film, then the GM is the director. The GM is the interface in which the player's input to the game world is processed. The GM is also the representation of the game world that delivers the world's response to the characters.</i> <i>The GM plans an impromptus world to facilitate the characters created by the players and help the players create their story. The players express what they wish a character to do, the GM listens and narrates the outcome. This exchange of dialogue between the players and the GM is the process under which this game is played.</i>



	<i>A GM is not a voice actor nor are they an storyteller or a writer. A GM is a <u>mediator of fiction, adjudicator of tellings and a Referee.</u></i>	
	Referee:	
	A referee makes a <u>final ruling</u> over a <u>dispute on rules</u> . Generally, a player holds a conversation with the group to tell them what they wish for their PC to accomplish. Where the GM and the referee validates and judicates the proposal.	
	Designer (The Shitty Dev):	
	A Participant who makes, hacks and fills out the paperwork to create a complete game with their own content. A GM might be a designer, if they modify and alter the formal system's primary materials for their game. By definition, this also refers to the primary creators.	
Character:	A constituent of characteristics who populates a Story to operate on a Narrative . They are entities that can be manipulated by a Teller . Typically, the rights to portraying a character are bound to certain Players .	
	Player Character (PC):	A character who only a Player has the right to portray. They are avatars of which a player is linked to the Fiction .
	Non-player Character (NPC):	A character who only a GM has the right to portray. They are elements in a Story whose purpose is to facilitate a Narrative .
	The World:	A key concept that spans over all temporal and spatial dimensions at once. It is a force of nature that overrides human (in this case the character's) effort. Akin to fate and destiny, the way of the world, or the impartial will of God/Heavens that cannot be challenged.
Real:	The reality the Players inhabit.	



Fiction:	The reality the Characters inhabit. The fiction obeys the decisions of The World. Note that common sense, knowledge and universal laws for the “reality within the game” may not coincide with the “reality outside the game”. The fictional reality is independent of the real reality. How the fictional reality is commonly set up to be dependent on the <u>Settings the Fiction takes place in.</u>	
Canon:	A general collection of facts, laws and principles (information) that are acknowledged by all participating observers to be <u>irrefutably true or due to be true</u> to the story told (as far as the observer is concerned).	
	Personal (Head) Canon:	The canon that is recognized by individual Players. The GM’s Personal Canon is where Player’s pitches of Tellings are made towards. The GM’s personal canon is also commonly the effectively irrefutable Common Canon.
	Public Canon:	The canon that is recognized by all Players, where pitches of Tellings are made by the GM after incorporating the Player’s pitch into the Narrative. The public canon is the active Narrative during a session that is subjected to acknowledgement by the Players.
	Common Canon:	The canon that is recognized by all Participants when the Personal Canon of all players and the Public Canon coincides. The common canon is the well-established facts of the Fictional Story.
Narrative:	The outcomes of a Story as it is told. Encompassing the plot, cause and effect, and event-to-event ongoings of a Story.	
Telling:	A piece of information or element contributed to the story. Often a Personal Canon pitched to the GM with regard to the Story in the Public Canon. Note that a telling may encompass all aspects and elements of a story, not just with regards to characters, but settings, plots etc.	
Teller:	The Player who is performing the Telling.	



Fantasia Specific

Fantasia Specific		
Story:	An exhaustive Fiction made up of story Arcs , a beginning and an end. The story encompasses a Narrative , recreating a particular experience following a theme.	
	Arcs:	A self-enclosed story with a plot. Each arc can contain elements that intertwine with other arcs to form an <u>overarching Story</u> .
	Acts:	A digestible division/fraction of the current Arc made up of scenes.
	Scene:	A digestible division/fraction of the current Act set upon a Stage for Actors to perform in and react to an Event . A scene is the most basic building block of play. A scene might change from stage to stage as the character exits one and enters another.
Scenario:	A scenario is a plan of how a game will be undertaken. Specifically, the scenario is a <u>collection of tools</u> to host a TTRPG. <u>Never mistake a scenario for a plot.</u> A scenario may consist of a collection of settings, characters, possible developments, events and NPC scripts that act as a resource to quickly draw creative inspiration from during a Game Session . A scenario may scope over a Story , a specific Arc , Act or Scene . It is up to the GM and their game group to use these tools to <u>geneticise an emergent narrative plot</u> . This includes artefacts such as handouts, dice, miniatures and props.	
	Actors:	The Characters that are involved with the Scene and are ready to act within a scene. If characters are not the actors of the same scene, they may not interact with the scene or the actors within it.
	Stage:	A narrative time, location, environment or space for Actors to perform and interact within. A collection of items.
	Event/ Stimuli:	An event/stimuli is a Story problem or a task posed to the Actors in a Scene that <u>challenges the status quo</u> of the Scene when resolved. While an event may elapse over any duration, the resolution must bring the event to a close without future implications.
	Arena:	A set of Stages that holds a set of reserved Events all contained within the space the arena envelopes.



Item:	An <u>object, being, concept, ideal or abstraction</u> that can be found, traded, lost, forgotten, brought, stolen and received/gifted. Sentient or not. This includes <u>any non-living entity</u> in the game, including walls, doors, unusual terrain, traps, sensory effects and even abstract concepts with mechanical effects like <u>light/visuals, sound/audio, scent/smell</u> , such as the darkness of night or the blinding light of day.	
	Prop:	An item that exists within a Stage . Note that supporting characters are props, not actors.
	Site:	A location that serves as the canvas/backdrop of a stage.
	Gear:	An item that is associated with a Character for an Attempt .

Fundamental Gameplay Structure

1. GM narrates, explaining what is happening in fiction.
2. Players **pitch a personal canon** to the GM as to what will happen. This is telling.
3. GM compares the pitch to what is happening.
4. GM makes a decision on what will happen and updates their personal canon.
5. GM narrates a telling, merging the player's personal canon with their personal canon as the **public canon**.
6. When the public canon is acknowledged by all participants, the public canon becomes the **common canon**. Ready to be narrated upon by the GM in the next cycle.



Delivery, Bridging and Telling (GM)

As the GM, one of your roles is to bridge the discontinuity between the fictional world and the real world. As the game is played by the tabletop, the players are never truly observing or experiencing the narrative elements. Whatever description of elements or events must be communicated clearly for the observers to form the intended imagination of the scene. A vague scene creates confusion, and inhibits the player's ability to roleplay due to lack of information. This will cause the player's recognition of the canon to deviate from the common canon. Thus, the players who tell the story, the currently active teller, have the responsibility to clearly communicate their story through **Bridging**.

Bridging

Bridging refers to the act of making a connection between two continuities, the fictional one and the real one.

The fictional continuity refers to the story told and the real continuity (reality) refers to the world the player inhabits. Player's knowledge of the fiction must come from a teller. The teller is the player that moves the narrative by adding elements to it, most commonly through roleplaying. Adding elements to the story that forwards and/or compensates the plot, thus allowing the fictional story to advance.

Teller

A teller typically has their own personal canon of the fiction they are trying to tell and to add to the narrative of the public canon. The goal of the teller, while putting up a display in the guise of role-playing, is to communicate their personal canon to the party. The teller pitches their personal canon to be included in the public canon for the GM to adjudicate. The party, on the other hand, accepts the pitch accepted by the GM as new information added to the story to roleplay from. If the GM is the teller, the GM is delivering the common canon as per their role.

To maintain the common canon, descriptions and imagination need not match exactly. It is the key, non-arguable information that needs to remain consistent rather than the details. Plus a healthy amount of suspension of disbelief.

Drama is not the game of role-playing, but the choices made to authentically play the role.

Note that the teller, especially the players, are not limited to telling fiction regarding their designated characters only. Like the GM, every player is able to make contributions to any elements in the public canon (unless prohibited otherwise). This includes but is not limited to: props, settings and even truth & fate.

I.e. A player may pitch an element that may not be true, or even have existed before now. However, if accepted into the public canon, the previous ambiguous and undefined element will become a true part of the story.



Player: *“I present section 18, 7:11 of the Tryest Record. It implies that we have the right of passage.”*

Case 1: GM: *“Ah... The classic 7:11 argument, backed by section 61.b of the Inter Galactic Constitution. Clever.”*

[Pitch accepted]

Case 2: GM: *“Not if 13:12 of the Minisicue Treaty applies! Your argument is invalid!”*

[Pitch declined]

In both cases, though initially appearing nonsensical, the player’s pitch is under the GM’s evaluation. Whether the pitch is accepted as the public canon or not, the story continues. If accepted, the initial pitch is adapted into the story regardless of either positive or negative plot progression.

There are many methods for a teller to make this pitch of fiction:

- Vocal telling.
- Physical display. (pictures, music ect.)
- Live-action acting. (effectively LARP or improvisational drama)

The most common form for bridging is through vocal tellings. The speaker speaks and the listener listens. The most effective form of bridging is the activity known as LARP. However, for the purpose of efficiency, the vocal telling method is preferred.

Telling Feedback Loop:

Effectively, the relationship between the GM and the rest of the Players forms a feedback loop where they bounce/pass on the role of the teller:

1. Narration told by the GM. A telling.
2. Players make a pitch to the public canon. A telling.
3. The GM and the rest of the players evaluate the pitch.
4. GM makes the verdict on the pitch.
5. GM incorporates the pitch’s telling appropriately into the next phase of telling, accepted or not.

The goal of this loop is to progress the plot of the story by trying to progress through and resolve scenes in order to finish telling an overarching story.



Structure of Play

Pre-Play (Prep and Session 0)

A stage of play where all participants gather to discuss the logistics of the upcoming running of a TTRPG **Game**. Each participant began to prepare for the running of the actual **Session**.

Example: Logistics

- Scheduling, date, time, location, food, refreshments.
- Genre of play, themes, expectations, responsibilities, bans.
- Formal system used.
- Character building, world building, story forging.
- Seating Arrangement, Marching Order.
- Character Creation, Introductions.

Character Creation

It is the GM's responsibility to assist players in creating, modifying or selecting a character. The GM should inspect each player's record sheet(s) for errors and be aware of their characteristics.

Introductions

Every participant should introduce themselves and their character to everyone. So that every participant gets to know who their companions are in this activity.

Participant's Responsibilities before a Session:

Player:

Familiarises with the rules - Every participant should understand the rules for the session to run without hindrance.

Revise the Expectations - Every participant should understand the expected behaviours and the tabletop etiquette associated with this **Game**.

Upkeep with information records - Every participant should be up to date with the documents required for play (record sheets, accessories, tools) and current advancements of the story for the next upcoming session to run smoothly.

GM:

Mental preparations - You are the director, your aim is to have fun and make sure players have fun at telling a collaborative story.

Revise and practice - Familiarise with the given **Scenario**, or create a scenario to use.

Recap and Review - Go over the events that occurred during the last session of play to refresh everyone on their progress within the story.



Designer:

Personalise the Game - Hack, change the rules to cater for the **Game**.

Update the players - On new, unorthodox, non-standard rules and contents in play for this game.

Communicate effectively - Communicate and cater your idea to the audience in the most understandable way.

Main Play (Scenario)

A scenario is a plan of how a game will be undertaken. A scenario may consist of a collection of settings, characters, possible developments, events and NPC scripts that act as a guide for how the **Story**, or the whereabouts of how a specific **Arc**, **Act** or **Scene** might progress in play. Effectively, a scenario is the detailed undergoing and content for the game session(s).

This includes artefacts such as handouts, dice, miniatures and props.

A scenario may be prepared for only one session, or it may pan over multiple sessions. A game may complete after a scenario is finished, or it may be extended to play through more scenarios.

When the main play begins, the contents of a scenario is unravelled. The GM begins their narration, heralding the beginning of an **Arc**, opens an **Act** and frames **Scenes** for the PCs to partake in.

Main Play Loop

1. Began a Scenario.
2. Herald an Arc.
 - a. Open an Act.
 - i. Frame a Scene.
 - ii. Close the Scene. Frame a new Scene? Go to i.
 - b. Close the Act. Open a new Act? Go to a.
3. Close the Arc. Open a new Arc? Go to 2.
4. Conclude the scenario. Open a new Scenario? Go to 1.



A Scene

The fundamental building blocks of a story.

For a player to roleplay and in extension to tell, they must have a scene to work with. The GM is responsible for establishing a scene. The player learns of the scene and makes their telling in response to the parameters presented by the scene. When satisfactory, the GM resolves the scene and moves onto another scene.

A scene plays out a period of time upon a [Stage](#), by actors who respond to a [Stimulating Event](#).

Whilst the GM is the one deciding which scenes to proceed to, the players may pitch ideas regarding what they wish to achieve and scenes they wish to role-play in next.

Now it would be quite boring and shrewd for players to roleplay as “nothing” in the space of “nowhere” at the time of “who knows” to a plot of “I donno” along with the theme of “data not found”.

The structure relies on completing the scene where every scene has some unfolding event that needs to be resolved. A scene occurs in **Action Time** and must have an event of interest and influence, otherwise, the passage of **Plot Time** is implied between scenes, acts and arcs.

Action Time

Interesting things that demand action to happen.

A time interval where interesting events occur and a divergence arise, requiring players to make choices. Typically known as uptime, this interval of time is often under tension, with the character's stakes on the line in the foreground of the story.

Arena Time

Interesting things happening in an arena.

An informal time interval where arena-crawling gameplay is conducted under a gameplay loop. Falls between action time and plot time. Also typically known as uptime.

Plot Time

Not interesting things happen.

A time interval where events are developing in a direction as implied by the resolved events in action time. Typically known as downtime, this interval of time presents no stakes and is usually conceded in the background of the story.

A scene that is currently undergoing is presumed to be the **active scene**. All other planned scenes are **inactive**.



Anatomy of a Scene

To set a scene, the teller must establish the following:

1. Frame the Scene.
 - Set the Stage.
 - Introducing the Actors.
2. Play the Scene.
 - Actors act (allow the actor to interact with the scene for a while before playing the inciting event).
 - Unfold the stimulating Event.
3. Close the Scene.
 - Resolve the Event.
 - Exit the Actors (optional).

Frame the Scene:

Set the Stage:

Set the Stage involves framing the time, space, and the action of which the current roleplaying session occurs in. The **when, what, where**. It is also known as “decorating/populating the stage” with items.

See: [A Stage](#)

Props

Stages can be decorated with features, elements and descriptors that are details that may play an influence on the scene. The system of methodology that a stage operates under can be vastly different depending on the formal system. After the stage is set, actors are introduced.

I.e. GM: *“It is a bustling town. The sun is shining and the birds are perching on the edges of buildings. The sandstone dwellings erected from the ground casts long shadows under the morning sun. The market is already set up, several tents and shelter of cloth stretched along the foot of the column-like buildings. The miscellaneous goods and people alike crowd the streets (1).*

In the distance, smoke rises from a pit that smells of spice and lamb. Close to you is a side street leading deeper into the dwelling areas. And nearby are several squatting merchants eying the passersby for easy prey to peddle their wares (2).”

(1) Up until here, the introduced descriptions are all fluff. Used to set the mood and describe the imagery of the scene. All descriptions are in the background (but may be brought to the foreground when demanded).

(2) From here, each prop that is worthy of the player’s attention is introduced. Their locations are given, indicating a prompt that they may be interacted.



Actor

Is just a character portrayed by a player who acts in a Scene. Including PCs and NPCs.

Introduce the Actors

This process involves choosing how many and who the actors are for the scene. Then the actors are introduced to come on-stage and act within the scene. The **who**.

On-stage: Characters who are on-stage are involved (but not necessary on the stage) with the scene. Only on-stage characters may act and influence the current scene.

Off-stage: Characters who are off-stage sit out and are not involved with the scene.

Entering and Exiting

Actors must become on/off-stage in some manner. This is typically a description of how they arrived/departed at/from a scene and their attitude towards the contents/atmosphere of the scene.

Actors may choose to:

- Enter the scene sequentially.
- Enter the scene as a party.

Entering ([intruding](#), if the scene is already in progress) and exiting may occur at any time during a scene.

When the first actor enters the scene through a telling, the scene is played and the inciting event is triggered after some time for the actor to act freely in the scene.

I.e.

GM: *Hitori, Tanin, you are here this morning to procure some supplies for your journey. Do you both enter the town and shop together, or wander onto the bustling streets alone?*

Tanin: *I think I'll pass on this one. Shopping isn't my thing. I trust Hitori to handle this.*

Hitori: *I'll enter the market and start conversing with the merchants, what are they selling?*

... GM explaining the shopping list, Hitori performs shopping...

GM (Merchant): *As you are finishing up, a chubby man twirled his moustache, stood up and beckoned you to approach: "Neehehe... Come, come closer. Have a look... AT THIS CHEST!"*



Play the Scene:

Action

The actors may freely interact with the scene. The GM may provide an introduction or brief embellishments. It is now up to the players to role-play:

- Interact with the scene (actors, features, any other elements).
- Interact with other PCs (actors).
- Carry out certain activities.

Establishing the Status Quo

After a duration of play, the scene will settle into a predictable status quo. The status quo of a scene is the state of affairs where the narrative enters an agreeable direction of development. This typically occurs only when the common canon is in sync among all the players. It is expected that all players will share a tacit understanding of the outlook of the narration and the underlying setup that upholds it. Resulting in uninterrupted, progressive action for the session. Ideally, the status quo will align with the scenario the GM had planned.

The status quo can be viewed as the resting, equilibrium state of a scene. When a scene's status quo is established, the stimulating event that breaks it will be more apparent and impactful on the player's recognition. Thus, bringing more attention to the event.

A meaningful scene presents a status quo, but is on the verge of change. An stimulating event initiates the change; the PCs are going to be involved with the change.



Unfold the Stimulating Event

The stimulus erupts, the status quo is broken and the scene is under tension due to the event's outburst. Usually, the actors who get involved with a stimulus will have stakes on the line.

Tension, Stakes and Stimulus

Tension - is the ambient stress the narration is under induced by a set of complications. Those complications are narratively important and will determine the direction and outcome of the story.

Whilst under tension, a scene will require a more detailed inspection of its turn of events. Usually, with precision and in an orderly fashion.

Stake - is a manifestation of interest and desire at risk. A character with stakes on the line will either have gains, losses or both at varying degrees, influenced by a set of circumstances with complications.

Stimulus - is any occurrence that will present an opportunity for change in action for the current scene to advance in a separate direction from its status quo.

Know that an event can be as dramatic as explosions to as subtle as an abnormal gust of wind. The presence of an effective event will steer the development of the scene in a different direction from the status quo momentary and/or permanently.

I.e.

Whilst the status quo of the town may be a lively, chattering, market (Hitori is able to complete their shopping without a hitch), an event will change this apparent mood. An explosion will naturally bring this scenery under tension. An attack? An accident? A disaster?

- *How will the features of the scene change?*
- *What are the responses of the actors?*
- *Are there props introduced and/or removed?*

The blasting wind may merely attract the attention of a few who are keen and were before they return to their daily activities. Little do the dull know that the gust that brushed by their cloaks were the cunning hands of snitching thieves. For those who are aware, what is their decision in the face of this knowledge?

See: [A Event/Stimuli](#)



Close the Scene:

Resolve/Clear the Event

At any point, the GM can declare that the conditions to clear a stimulating event have been met. When this happens, the event ends as the GM announces so. Usually, this is when either:

- One of or more of the event's clear conditions had been met.
- The stimulus has settled, and the scene has returned to its (new) status quo.
- All players chose to abstain from the event and/or escape from an involuntary event.

When one or more events conclude, clearly indicate the outcomes and consequences the stimulus had introduced to the new status quo. This is usually inferred from the conditions achieved in clearing the event.

Exit the Actors

At any point, the GM can declare a scene to conclude and close. When a scene concludes, all actors will assume to depart from the scene (not necessarily the physical, fictional location), removing themselves from the influence from the scene and its events. What any character is up to is to the discretion of the GM and/or their respective portrayers.

Appropriately have the PCs exit the scene however they wish. Perhaps inducting the next scene in the process. However, it is acceptable to end a scene without deliberately exiting the actors and merely assume their departure.

Where to/What's Next?

After a scene closes, we must prepare to load up (frame) and commence the next scene in the line. Either the decision emerged from the scene as a natural course of action or the players may prompt a direction they would like to develop the narrative in.

Example:

Hitori has failed to capture the thief. However, he has options for the next step:

- *Report the incident to a town guard* → *Next Scene: The guardhouse*
- *Return to discuss with the merchant* → *Next Scene: The merchant's store*
- *Continue with their search of the thief* → *Next Scene: The streets*

Or the GM may take over the agency as the narrator and proceed with the natural progression of the story as they see fit.

- *Hitori moves on to randevu with their companions at the tavern* → *Next Scene: The Tavern*

See: [Inter-Scene](#)



A Stage

The stage is the site upon which a scene takes place. Effectively a canvas to be populated with props, events to cater for the actors to enter and interact with.

Rule of Thumb:

Answer the question of When, What, Where?

An Item

A Stage is decorated with a set of items. An item is:

- An object or being that can be found, traded, lost, forgotten, brought, stolen and received/gifted. Sentient or not. This includes any non-living entity in the game, including walls, doors, unusual terrain, traps, sensory effects and even abstract concepts with mechanical effects like light/visuals, sound/audio, scent/smell, such as the darkness of night or the blinding light of day.
- This includes events/stimuli.

A common slang for such items is a “Doodad”. Though the practical effect is more similar to a prop in a stage play. Imagine items as props, even the ground the Actors walk on, the background they are in front of, the building they are under... Is it cobblestone? Is it dirt? Or is it a crimson carpet... Of the carcasses of your comrades. I love alliteration.

Example of Things You wouldn't think are Items/Props:

- **Meta-elements:** Backgrounds, foregrounds, narrative texts.
- **Locations:** Places, Buildings, just imagine pop-up cardboard castles.
- **Moods & Tone:** Is the atmosphere as thick as butter? Is the moral down the drain? Or is the stage a merry, jolly fiasco?
- **Characters:** Supporting characters are props on a stage. But note that Actors are not, for that they enter a scene and become on-stage post-creation of the stage. Similarly, any item they bring or create is classified as “their” gear instead of a prop.

In short, a stage can be constructed purely from verbal descriptions, though sometimes it is accompanied by visual artefacts such as pictures, music and miniatures. Even the scent. Whilst it is not necessary for items of a stage to be formally documented, it is possible that a prop is a gameplay element that has a mechanical impact on the gameplay of the formal system).

Example: The Stench of Stitches that Twitch

The smell of this foul beast is so intolerable even the noses of witches twitch and shrunk into a ditch. It is a miasma of booger green gas that hugs the floor like moss.

Just die if your character smells this. I hope only their nose falls off. God save whatever state this is in.



An Event/Stimuli

Something “interesting” that must be done.

An event is a stimulus for storytelling. It takes the form of a problem breaking the status quo of the scene in the peripherals or a task that could be resolved or neutralised. The stimulus usually provokes the status quo by disrupting it with a problem (often a call to adventure to the party to respond), but the impact of the event on the scene is undetermined. Actors who (voluntary or involuntarily) partook in the event will bring the event to some conclusion. The terms of the resolution will change the scene’s status quo.

The problem commonly has conditions that uphold it and/or will defuse it. Accomplishing the conditions must bring the event to a close without future implications (within the context of the active scene at least, may exhibit an arching implication). When an event is resolved, that event is CLEARED.

The GM can introduce a new event at any point during a scene. Typically, a scene requires no more than one planned event per scene. The party’s response will suggest either they will accept the event or reject the event. Engaging with the event often implies the actor places an item at stake and the arisement of tension.

- **Accept** - Engage with the event.
- **Reject** - Avoiding involvement with the event.

The nature of an event can be of the following:

- **Voluntary**
 - The event does not involve the party, yet the party may choose to be involved with the event.
- **Involuntary**
 - The event involves the party or all actors regardless of the party’s choice.
- **Unapproachable**
 - The event occurs outside of the player’s influence, the party can only observe the event’s effects.
- **Undisclosed**
 - The event occurs in the background without announcement to the party (typically redundant).

Example Events:

- **Voluntary:** *The thief steals under observation from the party.*
- **Involuntary:** *The thief steals from the party or the township (ambiguously observed).*
- **Unapproachable:** *The thief steals from the township, only to be mentioned later that the town suffers from thievery.*
- **Undisclosed:** *The thief’s activity is implied, but never mentioned.*



Conditions

Unless it is unapproachable, an event must have:

- **Victory Condition(s)**
- **Defeat Condition(s)**
- **Draw Condition(s)**

Example Event:

GM: “(A voluntary event!) The merchant’s chest has been stolen! How do you wish to respond?”

Hitori: “Not on my watch! I’m going after the fucker that stole it.”

GM: “Event accepted! Your victory condition is to **[Retrieve the Goods]**. Your defeat condition is that the **[Thief Escapes with the Goods]**. Any other resolution will result in a draw. Do you understand?”

Hitori: “Alright alright, I got it~ So do I get to pounce on the guy? I was right beside the merchant, didn't I get to see the thief coming?”

Naturally, the GM may choose to hide certain conditions, only to reveal them later.

- **Hidden/Secret Condition(s)**
- **Implicit Condition(s)**

I.e. Hidden Conditions

[It’s the Inside that Matters]:

The thief may fool you with a distraction. If you retrieve the chest but not its contents, it’ll be quite disappointing ain’t it?

I.e. Implicit Conditions

[Don’t Disturb the Township]:

If the township is threatened too much, you’ll attract the scorn of the town and possibly draw the unwelcomed interest of law enforcement.

Resolution

When an event reaches its end, it is resolved and CLEARED. The resolution carries implications depending on the conditions achieved:

- **Victory Condition(s)** Satisfied.
- **Defeat Condition(s)** Satisfied.
- **Draw Condition(s)** Satisfied.



In addition to the implications of any other condition(s), depending on how the party has satisfied the resolutions conditions listed, might each carries a distinct narrative implication. This effect must be clearly indicated, announced and narrated.

Hitori: *“The chest is empty?”*

GM: *“The chest is empty.”*

Hitori: *“The thief’s gone with the contents?”*

GM: *“Apparently so.”*

Hitori: *“Fuck!”*

GM: *“Dun Dun Dunn ~ The [Thief Escaped with the Goods] ~ !”*



Post-Play

When the GM has declared the end of Main Play, the session comes to an end and post-play begins. In post-play, the actual gameplay has ended and the dealing of logistics regarding the game began.

Reflection and Feedback

Take time to rethink the game session and give feedbacks to every player involved:

- Resolve arguments held during the session.
- What went well? What went poorly?
- Any details left that need to be completed?
- What must be done before the next session?

This is the appropriate time to invent new rulings with the GM to be applied in the next game session. A diligent upkeep of reflection and feedback will gradually mould the game to the group's personal preferences. Remember, no session is perfect, but a whole game may aspire to be perfect.

Bookkeeping/Logistics

Tally and tie up every element that needs to be recorded in preparation of the next game. The GM should remind the players the items they have acquired and other information necessary to be kept track of. It is important that information regarding the game is kept up to date with everyone.

This is also the appropriate time to discuss the most memorable moments of the session for each character. If the **Legendarium** of a character is being kept (a log of memorable achievements, connections made etc.), come to an agreement on who and what events are to be recorded in the legendarium.

Cleanup

Once the session ends and **Bookkeeping** is completed, clean up the venue as it had looked like when you came in.



Acts and Arcs

An Act

An Act is a division of scenes in meaningful, logical story cycles. An Act is simply a collection of scenes delivered under some form of storytelling structure. General storytelling techniques overlap greatly with the design of Acts.

The decisions over when an Act starts and ends is subjective. The decision is liable to storytelling techniques.

Rule of thumb:

An Act must mark a major milestone in storytelling.

A full story cycle of Acts composes an Arc.

Tip: Arcs are a good time to introduce new elements to the game such as new rulings or contents to add to the formal system. Players may learn before an arc begins and will have an entire arc's time to familiarise themselves with the new elements. At the same time, an arc's time is an acceptable cycle of play before a fresh idea becomes stale.



An Arc

An Arc is a full resolution of a story cycle (of a chain of Acts). An Arc is simply a collection of Acts delivered about some storytelling structure.

The decisions involving when an Arc starts and ends are subjective. The decision is liable to storytelling techniques.

Rule of thumb:

An Arc must be a stand-alone, self-inclusive story following a story cycle.

While an Arc may be a constitutional part of an overarching story, an arc must fundamentally follow a story cycle.

Example: Act Structure

Act I: Exposition

The Exposition Act acts as the Scenario's prologue. is where the introduction of the status quo and the setup of the Scenario occurs.

Act II: Action

The Action is the meat of the Scenario, where the story and events unfold. During this Act, the PCs meet and learn about the situation or conflict, encounter various events, understand the status quo, and build up events step by step to the Climax. The events in this Act influence the Scenario the most.

Act III: Climax

The Climax encompasses the encounter with the face-off against the stimulating event of the Scenario – what would be the boss character of a video game. Of course, the outcome doesn't have to be a battle; that's up to the Players to determine.

Act IV: Dénouement

The Dénouement acts as the Scenario's epilogue. Its actual contents depend greatly on what actually happened over the course of the session. However, this act must conclude the Scenario. This act should remain short, succinct and no new information should be introduced and/or further development should occur in this Act. Handle this act appropriately as per the development of the narration.

Other story cycle examples may include [The Hero's journey](#), [Seven Plots of Shakespeare](#) etc.



Appendices (Part 1): Dumpling's Guide to Scene Design

The compilation guide to scenes, actors, events and miscellaneous design features.

Aim: To suggest features of a gameplay presentation style that is able to facilitate an emergent narrative to tell a story of a particular experience.



Appendix 1.A: Filmmaking Types of Scenes

Note: filmmaking and stage play knowledge may be directly applied to the Fantasia TTRPG Flow.

Introduction

Often one of the first scenes in a story. The introduction shows off the characters, background, setting, and more. It introduces and sets up the story for the reader.

Exposition & Preparation

The exposition is where the necessary information is explained to the characters and to the reader. It's where the conflict is seen. The preparation is where the characters make plans on how to deal with the conflict. They're prepping for a journey or for a fight or anything that will resolve the conflict.

Transition

If this was a movie, this is most likely where a travelling montage would occur with lots of panning over beautiful landscapes. The transition scene is exactly what it sounds like. The characters are on the move. This is usually a scene showcasing them moving from one place to another quickly, not explaining too much since not much may happen.

Investigation

Another one that sounds exactly like it says. The investigation is the characters searching for clues and trying to put together the pieces of whatever conflict they're trying to resolve. They're searching for information.

Revelation

The big reveal! This is when the characters and the players (or the player first) realise something big about the conflict. There's a discovery or they figure something out about their problem or another character – good or bad. This can be a real game-changer.

Escape & Pursuit

Another one that sounds like it says. The characters are escaping from some sort of capture or they're rescuing someone. Maybe they're the ones pursuing someone else. There can be a car chase, anything can happen. This one is usually pretty tense with high stakes and a good amount of action.

Aftermath

The aftermath can be something at the end, or it can be sprinkled throughout the story after certain big events happen. The aftermath shows how the characters deal with a certain situation after the fact. For example, there can be a big battle and a character dies. What do all the other characters do when the battle is over? How do they feel?

Resolution

The end. There's not too much to say about this one other than the characters have figured it out (or maybe not, depending) and the end wraps everything up nicely.



Appendix 1.B: Advanced Utilisations of Scenes

These are extra things you can do with scenes. All of the methods described below are intended for **Scenes**, but might also be applicable to **Acts** and **Arcs** through alterations of the concept.

Crashing/Intruding/Invading Scenes

Enter, exit, re-enter scene to perform some arbitrary task (Entering and leaving scenes in interesting ways).

A player character that is **off-stage** may choose to become **on-stage** regardless. As if the character just crashed into the scene, uninvited. If a player finds their character is not invited on-stage to a scene, they may ask the GM for the invitation.

Example: Screen Points

Players have a resource of “Screen points” to spend to crash a scene. Whereas if a player character was not compulsory to a scene, they might intrude on the scene by spending “screen points”.

*For screen points spent, a player character becomes **on-stage** for the current scene and may freely enter and leave a scene until it is closed. Similarly, screen points may be used to kick player characters **off-stage**.*

Entering and Exit Scenes

A character can be allowed to exit a scene and re-enter a scene. All within the same breath.

Example System: Hiding

When hiding, this creature is effectively removed from the scene. It will not be impacted by any element of the scene until it returns. When certain conditions are fulfilled, the character may choose to or is forced to re-enter the scene. With XX cost etc.

Certain rules can also be designed to interact with entering and exiting.

Example:

[Vanguard]

When you are the first Actor to enter a scene, gain benefit/something happens.

[Rearguard]

When you are the last Actor to leave a scene, gain benefit/something happens.



Scene Manipulation Scenes

A scene can be treated like a reel of recording tape. Designers can implement formal mechanisms to interact and manipulate it:

- **Scenes can be rearranged** - In chronological order? In theatrical order? Or in character spotlight order?
- **Scenes can be revisioned/re-embellished/retconned** - With elements that were not initially there. An actor? A prop? A stimulating event?
- **Scenes can be rewinded/flushed back or flushed forward** - Reversing some sequence of events and starting over (most commonly for safety reasons). Such as rewind/flashback to a previous scene or flash forward to a future scene.

Suspend Scenes

An active scene can be suspended at a certain point to allow [Parallel Resolutions](#). The suspended scene remains open, but is not immediately dealt with in the immediate conversation (inactive). Where the split scene is resolved and closed, the conversation returns to the suspended scene.

Split Scenes

A scene can occur at any fictional time, at any location. A scene immediately after is free of temporal and spatial consistency to the preceding scene. However, sometimes multiple scenes at different fictional times in different locations may occur during the same real-time. When this happens, there is a choice of resolving the scenes in parallel (not recommended) or sequentially (recommended).

Some reasons that multiple scenes may undergo at the same time:

- When the party splits up and player characters choose to enter different scenes, the scene splits.
- When two or more characters need to be at different locations to cooperate and achieve something.
- When a player becomes frustrated and needs a distraction in their own scene.



Parallel Resolution

When the separated scenes depend on each other's outcomes, it is preferable to close the scenes in parallel.

Step-by-Step Process of Parallel Scene Resolution

1. Choose the most appropriate scene to play first.
2. Play up until a point that warrants a change to another scene (Time, circumstance of something substantial changes).
3. Switch focus onto the other scene.
4. Announce the impact of the previous scene.
5. Repeat steps 1-4 until all scenes are closed.

Be careful not to let a scene run on for an unproportionate amount of time. Players on-stage other scenes are effectively 'benched' and can only observe. This will open players to distractions and interruptions. Though, coordination between two scenes can be arranged.

I.e. The stage is a river:

Scene A is upstream. Scene B is downstream. Player's influence is spread among the two scenes.

Opening a gate upstream of a river will flood the river downstream. When the gate is opened, it is a significant event that warrants switching to the downstream scene to announce its effects.

Tip: Leave players on a monumental fork-way of choices to keep them busy thinking before switching scenes. Or, allow players of other scenes to exert some influence on the current scene in action.

I.e. Scene Exclusive Elements

Each scene contains information or props that are useful in other scenes. Say scene B has a key to open the gate and the method to insert it.

Players involved with scene B will wish to deliver the key to scene A for the players involved with scene A to use.

While scene A is active, players of scene B may be able to "make phone calls" to the characters of scene A. Explaining the information on how to use the key.

Thus forming inter-connected action in two locations using phone calls.

Example System: Interjection/Intervenes

Every character has certain interjection actions they may perform if they are off-stage or on-stage in another inactive scene. While a scene they are not involved in is active, whilst appropriate, they may use their interject to contribute to the telling of the active scene.



Tanin: “I interject the scene Hitori’s in! I have an ability called **[Loitering]** which allows me to have a chance to appear anywhere. I hope I can show up in the path of the thief.”

GM: “Go on, make the check.”

**Tanin rolls and fails.*

GM: “You’re loitering around alright. You enter the scene as a spectator who just saw Hitori take off after a stranger.”

Tanin: “Damn it!... I guess I was just buying some kebabs at the store then... Go Hitori! I believe in you! I cheered as I proceeded to keep eating.”

Sequential Resolution

When the separated scenes are independent of each other’s outcomes, it is preferable to close the scenes in sequence.

1. Establish both scenes, determine which actor is on-stage, off-stage for each scene.
2. Choose the most appropriate scene to play first
3. Play and close it while the inactive players observe.
4. Move onto the next most appropriate scene, play and close it. Repeat until all scenes are closed.

Tip: Let the uninvolved player contribute to the public canon and make inferences on how a character will act.

Example:

GM: “Alright, Tanin is uninterested in pursuing the thief with Hitori. Unless Tanrin wishes to exit the scene immediately, we’ll split the scene sequentially. I’ll deal with Hitori first, meanwhile, Tanin’s character just eats kebabs.”

Tanin: “Alright, more mayonnaise please! Y’know, I think Hitori should just get a few kebab sticks and skewer that thief...”

... After Hitori’s scene closes ...

GM: “We return to Tanin, who is quite pleased with themself, enjoying mayo on kebabs... The shopkeeper says it’ll be 13 coins.”

Tanin: “... Should’ve just left the scene...”



Functional Categories of Scenes

Master Scene:

Scenes belonging to the GM and their NPCS. No player can intrude. Typically used for exposition, or to establish mood and background. Suitable if it is necessary to follow a script.

Play Scene:

Scenes that began with a PC introduced and the party as the centrepiece. Other PCs may intrude.

- It is the fundamental building block of theatre-style role-play.
- Player-prompted scenes are by default player scenes.

Crash Scene:

Scenes that began with an NPC introduced and the NPC as the centrepiece. Players may intrude. Typically included as digressions to the story that players may choose to intervene or not.

- NPC/GM initialised scenes are Master scenes.

Necktie Scene:

Scenes that assemble all the important actors in one scene. Typically used at the beginning and end of acts.

Segway Scene:

A scene used to segway into another scene. Usually briefly used to establish location and time. Usually void of events and not necessary to be intruded.

This scene is commonly used for travel. For example, a Segway scene in a forest consists of generic forest props, events and settings. For improvisational design, random charts and tables are ideally used to build a segway scene.

Between Scenes (Inter-Scene, Inter-Act, Inter-Arcs):

The time between scenes is used to resolve player and GM plans. A time to finish logistics and recording of information. A time the player announces which scenes they wish to progress to and the GM chooses the next scene to commence.

Unnecessary Role-playing Opportunities:

There are certain scenarios where role-playing does not contribute meaningful development to the story. In comparison to other role-playing opportunities within the same game, such digression appears to be a waste of valuable session time.



Where if an opportunity for role-playing is deterred from the experience the game wishes to achieve, that opportunity is best abandoned or reduced. Hence, performed out of character. A fixation outside of the core aspects (unless relevant) will lead to stagnation in the pacing and loss of direction in development. Where such role-playing opportunities are best addressed in a passing manner.

For example, in traditional dungeon crawling, shopping, haggling, and collecting information has little relevance to the core scenario of dungeon crawling. Where the interaction with the denizens and features of the dungeon is the primary direction of attention. The minor act of, say, shopping and haggling will use up valuable time that could be spent during the dungeon crawl. This is under the assumption that the stage of the arena is where role-playing will contribute meaningful development to the story.

Tip: Inter-scenes may be a good time to calculate progressions such as EXP.

Down/Outside/Off-Scenes:

An implicit scene where a character is described in minor detail to have done something. Usually without argument or the need to be acknowledged in the common canon.

Tip: Players who are inactive during a scene may receive some benefit outside of the active scene. Say, their characters were pursuing some arbitrary activity. This accompanies well with an **Character Roster**, where a set of PCs are available at the player's selection for any given game. The PCs that were benched for a game might therefore occupy some downtime scenes.

See: Campfire Gameplay

Intermission (Between Acts or Scenes):

A particular timing between acts where a scene reveals a retcon or a plot twist or a piece of information that alters the meaning of existing information. This type of scene is self-contained and can take place between any scenes without loss of information.

Scene-wide Effect

Naturally, scenes and stages can have their own gameplay benefits while active. Designed and hacked by the designer to have some influence over the actors in the scene.

I.e. Scene/Stage Bonuses

Certain scenes/stages are more suitable for certain developments.

A scene with a romantic mood will grant a benefit to winning a person over. A scene with a hot-blooded mood will grant a benefit to the first person that declares a blood boiling speech before battle etc.



Appendix 1.C: Advanced Utilisation of Actors

Extra things you can do with actors. Actors may be designated to and not limited to one of any of the following special actor roles:

The Actors

Protagonist

An actor may be designated as the protagonist for a scene. This is typically done for scenes that are intimately related to that actor, such as a scene that is an important development opportunity for that character. All other actors take on a supporting role to the protagonist for that scene.

Fellowship:

The protagonist may allow and deny player characters from entering the scene, on-stage. When the actors are introduced, the protagonist chooses who may accompany them, if any. When a player character crashes, the protagonist may deny the crash (with a cost such as screen points perhaps?).

Plot Armour:

In the gameplay system, grant the protagonist some form of benefit. Most commonly the ability to remain in action and able to monologue tellings. As for a scene dedicated to a specific character, it is desirable for them to be able to keep influencing the fiction.

Dominating Voice:

It is general etiquette for the protagonist to conduct the majority of the role-playing and speaking during a scene. When the protagonist speaks, everyone shuts up. Keep in mind it is also etiquette to allow the GM to narrate fully, and the NPCs to extrapolate fully before a telling is finished.

Lancer/Sidekick/Angel/Guardian/Wingman

A character may be designated as the lancer for another character for a scene. This is typically done for protagonists who are lacking in certain aspects that the lancer possesses. The lancer should complement and assist the chosen character in their tellings.

Assistance:

The lancer may offer augmentative assistance to the chosen character as if they are an extra right and/or left hand. All tellings made by the assisted character are enhanced significantly in an aid method unique to the lancer. In gameplay mechanics, this may be a benefit for the lancer making additions to the assisted character's telling: "Yes... and I also...".

**Sacrifice:**

If the chosen character were to be subjected to trauma, harm or unwanted effects, the lancer may act as a substitute for these effects instead. The lancer must be in the same scene as the chosen character. In one way or another, convince yourself that the lancers are able to take on these effects; no matter how inconceivable.

Supporting Voice:

Generally, the lancer adds to or builds from the tellings of the protagonist. The lancer bounces ideas with the protagonist and reflects on their conduct together. In most scenarios, the lancer is responsible for indigently keeping the protagonist on track (direction) with their tellings, warning the protagonist and protecting the protagonist from danger.

Rival/Nemesis

A character may be designated as the nemesis for a character for a particular reason and duration. The reason may be personal or impersonal, but must be solely targeted towards one character. The duration may only be for a scene, but may also elapse over multiple story arcs. The nemesis is a dedicated foil to another character that is similar to a lancer. Only that the nemesis enhances the tellings of the chosen character through opposition instead of cooperation.

Crossing-paths:

Nemeses cross paths regularly, and often in opposition. If a character is in a scene, their nemesis may invade the scene at any time. The character and the nemesis may choose to book their own scene mutually. This scene cannot be invaded by any characters not a part of this relationship.

Till the very end:

If desired, a character always knows the next scene their nemesis will be in. If not, an accurate prediction of the next scene their nemesis will be in.



More Example Roles

Naturally, more roles may be designed and hacked by the designer.

Example Actor Role: Harbinger

An actor may be designated as the harbinger for a scene. The harbinger may announce events that will occur in the upcoming scenes...

Example Actor Role: Harlequin

An actor who makes humorous remarks and gets rewarded for doing so.

Example Actor Role: Wolf

An actor who acts independently and gets rewarded for doing so.

Example Actor Role: White Knight

An actor who has sub-quests to escort a target actor or NPC.

Example Actor Role: Black Knight

An actor who has sub-quests to impose a target actor or NPC.

Example Actor Role: Anti-[Insert Role]

An actor who is an antonym for another role.



Appendix 1.D: Advanced Utilisation of Events/Stimulus

Extra things you can do with events. An event must also shape the world around it. From the actors and props involved in a scene to the future and past implications with the event as context.

Stimuli Manipulation

Re-contextualise an Event

- Change the target of the event.
- Change the details of the event.
- Change the condition.
- Changing the scene the event should occur in. Such as post-phoning or catalysing an event's occurrence through sub-conditions.

I.e.

- *Instead of letting the thief rob the merchant, let the thief rob you and bug'em!*
- *How many thieves?*
- *Change **[Return the Chest]** to **[Acquire the Chest]** and keep it.*
- *Introduce sub-conditions such as **[Follow the thief]** to post-phone the event to another scene: **[The Hideout]**.*

Flagged Events

Certain events are only applicable when a certain condition is met. These conditions are flags.

See: Event Flag Triggering

***I.e.** Telling guards to stay around the merchant's corner in a previous scene will cause guards to be present in the current scene.*



Functional Categories of Stimuli

Passive/Voluntary Stimuli

An event that only occurs if intruded upon by the Actors.

Active/Involuntary Stimuli

An event that actively seeks interaction with the Actors.

Potential Stimuli

An event that has the potential of occurring, given the appropriate trigger.

Ongoing Stimuli

An event that is already underway and most likely always was. It is often a part of the status quo. Instead of the event disrupting the status quo and the actors aiming to restore it, the resolution process for the actors is to disturb the (undesirable) status quo to establish a new one.

Brewing/Brooding Stimuli

A potential event triggered in the current scene becomes ongoing and is able to be interacted with in future scenes.

Root/Parent Stimuli

An event that will eventually spawn more events. If the root stimuli are resolved, branch stimuli will be resolved as well, if not with time. Child stimuli will persist regardless of the status of the stimuli it spawned from.

Branch Stimuli

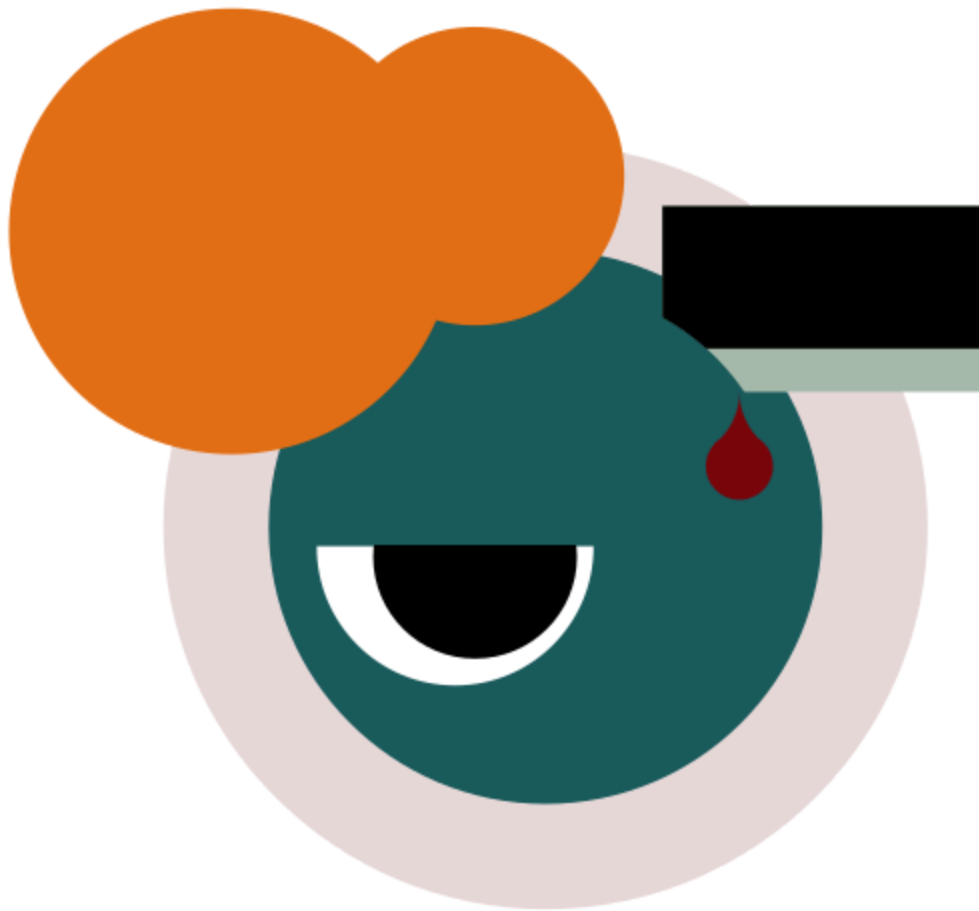
An event that arises due to the effects of a root stimulus. Dependent on its root stimuli.

Child Stimuli

An event that arises due to the effects of a parent stimulus. Independent of its parent stimuli.

Leaf Stimuli

An event that shall terminate a branch, forcing the PCs to investigate another branch of events.





Crawling TTRPG Gameplay Structure (Turn by Turn)

An orderly, methodological process in exploring a container (arena) to further character's self-development on a path. And to Game.

Aim: To define a **strictly** documented, orderly, methodological approach to navigating a fictional space under tension.

What is a Gameplay Structure in TTRPG? Part 2/2.

But how do you facilitate an experience? In what structure should you practise role-play and commit game-play?

This is a conundrum that is very hard to find balance in.

- *On one hand you want to facilitate a particular experience.*
- *On one hand you want to run a believable simulation.*
- *On one hand you want to tell a compelling story.*
- *On one hand you want to roleplay naturally.*
- *On one hand you want to play a game.*

However, what I have found is that the role-play and game-play opportunities always came about from:

The party goes to a **NEW** place. The place offers **ACTIVITIES**, **SCENARIOS** and **FEATURES**. First the party of **PERSONAS** applies their **PERSPECTIVE** and **ATTITUDE** on the place (perhaps **INDUCES** a number of changes), then takes **SOMETHING**¹ from it. They **MOVE ON** to another location and **REPEAT**.

- To change the characters as they live is to tell a story.
- To make sure everything works with internal consistency, is to simulate.
- To faithfully portray is to roleplay.
- To induce changes through choices is to game.

So I boiled it down to: Travelling from place to place, and interacting with the place to follow a pathway.

¹ **Be it a thing, knowledge, ideas, a piece of experience, advice or warning.*



The Pathway

"I believe that in TTRPG, arenas are deliberately designed containers to facilitate the pavement of the pathways a character walks."

- Hao Lin

Characters are condensations of the characteristics and aspects of humanity. A story with a narrative surrounding characters is a case study of something (i.e. idea, character, plot). In this study, the characters go down a pathway. This pathway is a route of tests, trials and possibility. Through the stimulation of the possibilities, the potential of a character is triggered to emerge. Eventually, compelling the character to develop and change. The player, actors who acts on behalf of the character and witness the unfolding of their legendarium has only one role in this:

Guardianship.

The following is taken from: First Principles to TTRPG: Portrayment and Guardianship, Hao Lin

Imagine the relationship between the player that created them and characters like between a parent and a child. The creator and the created.

In nurture, the player would want the best for them, limit what they can and cannot do to either to a set of ideal desires or beneficial traits. However, a character has characteristics set out as rules, laws that govern their existence. Adhering to those characteristics is what allows that character to retain its individuality.

A player must respect what they have created, the rules they laid out for that character and respect the characteristics assigned to it. For the character to act, to interact, to grow and live in our minds organically. To not tarnish their existence with our ego.



Crawling/Dungeoneering

What is Crawling an Arena?

To crawl is to move slowly with control and precision in an orderly fashion.

This can be physically moving about a fictitious space, or mentally exploring a character's psyche, or emotionally tracing through the nuanced relationships of all fictitious beings/entities/elements — All constitute as arenas for journeying, navigation and exploration to develop a character, plot idea, narration etc.

What is Dungeoneering?

An arena is a discriminatory test of exploration. In this exploration, the player and the PC we portray are pathfinding with the arena acting as our mediator in intrinsic (self) and extrinsic (worldly) discovery.

For traditional dungeons it is:

To chase the footprints of the past and reconstruct the narratives of the ancients.

In spirit, dungeoneering and pioneering are practically synonyms.

To confront the unknown that is strangeness.

Including yourself. Find for yourself:

- Joy of Reconstructing a Narrative
- Joy of Imagining a Fiction to Replace the Truth



Methodological Order

Information Horizon in Interactions with a Arena

- **Explore** - Introduction
- **Expand** - Familiarisation
- **Exploit** - Action
- **Execution** - Finale

It is of the utmost importance that the crawling gameplay structures are conducted **STEP BY STEP, METHODOLOGICALLY**. The order and discipline of the crawling gameplay structure is its defining characteristic. In the:

- Order in speaking (physically).
- Order in tellings (narration).
- Order in playing (game).

Usually, this means that the GM must gatekeep the game's sequences of turns of play and the party's player's acting order.

Maintain Strict, Acting Order and Pacing

You'd be surprised at how little or how much your players can achieve over one session.

You'd be surprised at how easily a session can descend into chaos without order.

You cannot have a meaningful arena crawl if strict time and space measurements are not maintained.

Players have to speak to play. They have to speak to communicate. They have to announce their pitches and make their tellings. At the fundamental levels, they must be allowed to speak and be heard. However, chaos descends quickly if the GM is unable to control the table. Players will talk over each other, order will be unsettled, causing difficulty in running a game:

- **Difficulty in communicating** - Expressing, observing and understanding.
- **Difficulty in sharing understanding** - The common canon will be disoriented among the players who cannot understand each other.
- **Difficulty in role-playing** - Hard to find respect for the actor and their performance if the observers fail to pay attention.
- **Difficulty in game-playing** - Rulings will be confused or misheard. A game without integrity or well-crafted rules is a game that cannot harvest fun.
- **Difficulty in enjoyment** - A clusterfuck is hardly enjoyable. Similarly moments of awkward silence of not knowing what should happen next, who is speaking only celebrates boredom.



The GM takes control of the game as the facilitator. It is the GM's responsibility to control the attention and interest of the players in a familiar and predictable rhythm of play. To ensure that:

- **Attention** is appropriately distributed (among the party).
- **Interest** is maintained (across the party).
- **Predictable** rhythm is established (in the party).
- **Prompts** are given for role-playing and game-playing (for players).

Acting Order

At any stage of play, during any pacing or rhythm, the order of agency must be maintained. The acting order is the order the players get the opportunity to make their pitches in telling the narrative of the story for the purpose of roleplaying. At the same time, this order is equivalent to the order of taking a turn/making an action for the purpose of gameplay.

For any acting order, the GM must establish at the beginning the:

- [Temporal and Spatial Scale](#) used.
- [Arena Crawl Level](#).
- [Exploration Pacing](#).

Every cycle of acting order phases the **Temporal Scale** by one unit.

Most of the time, the acting order between players' pitched tellings are inconsequential to gameplay. This is merely done for order. Sometimes, the acting order is consequential such as during a tense battle, chase or stimulating events which requires precedence. In these scenarios, a formal system will determine the acting order of all parties involved.

Tip: Phase Players Predictably.

This strategy of control is to phase the players turn by turn. Establish a particular turn order and stick to it. Skip and come back to those who are not ready. The more familiar a process, the less obstructive a game session will be subjected to unfamiliarity. Moreso, this will control the distribution of attention.

Example System: Seating Order Initiative

The order of speaking and in-game order is determined by the order of seating at the table.

For example, the GM prompts players to act clockwise in an order, skipping those who are not ready and returning to them in the next cycle until all players have been accounted for. When all players are accounted for, the next phase begins.



Sometimes, this requires some tacit understanding such as:

- When a player is talking, try not to interrupt unless it is constructive.
- Understand when to role-play (when attention is actually gathered towards the actor).
- Understand when interjections can and should be made.

Digression: Interjection

Occasionally, a player wishes to construct upon an active player's telling. Yet, they must do so before the telling is adjudicated by the GM (or they wish to revoke it post-adjudication). An interjection system must also be designed and maintained in strict order.

Example: Conflict Resolution, Scatter-Regroup Model

A party functions as a group until deliberately separated. Under this model, the ability for characters to interject one another in a party are phrased in terms of:

- **Proximity** - Will the space scale allow interjection?
- **Urgency** - Will the time scale allow interjection?
- **Relatability** - Will the narration allow interjection?

For example, party in a arena with multiple features at different space positions that can trigger stimulating events with different time scales:

A Player may Interject if:

- *PCs are together (before splitting up to investigate the features).*
- *Characters interacting with the same features may interject one another.*
- *PCs have regrouped (after corresponding features are investigated).*

Elsewise, the characters may not interject another's conflict resolution (best to remain silent).



The Scatter-Regroup, Orderly Gameplay Structure

With predictable order, the Scatter-Regroup model loop is:

1. GM narrates, describing a location's features.
 - a. The GM describes the location, sets the stage.
 - b. When the GM is ready, prompt players to proceed.
2. Players navigate the location (scatter).
 - a. They might choose to explore at a particular pace.
 - b. They might choose features to interact with.
 - c. They might request more information.
 - d. They might role-play.
 - e. They might perform any other perceivable action.
3. GM processes and narrates the result of each action.
 - a. Handle stimulative events if it arises (battle, traps, NPCs etc.)
 - b. If several PC's actions interrelate, process them together.
4. GM updates any element that requires tracking (time progression, resource depletion, NPC motion etc.).
 - a. When all players are ready, prompt them to proceed.
5. Repeat 2-4 until satisfied.
 - a. If interrupted by stimuli, return to 1.
6. Players (regroup) and move on to another location.



Location Description/Decoration

You'd be surprised at how many elements of your narration can go in player's one ear and out the other.

Such information should always be delivered succulently. Include only the necessary descriptions for discovery, and reserve the details for investigation. For the benefit of the players to remember them and reconstruct the GM's telling of their personal canon in their personal canon to form the public canon. In order to match understanding.

I.e. For mapping, reciting clues and evidence.

Description Factors:

- **Detailed Dimensions** - For mapping purposes only.
- **Highlight Key Features** - ~4 features, one in each space scale.
- **Condition of the Arena** - Visibility, arena wide features that disregard locations.
- **Gateway & Connectors** - Pathways to other arena locations.
- **Superficial Information** - Incritical information, descriptions, decoration, flourishes and flare.
- **Detailed Information** - Typically ignored, either briefly or sparsely described.

Usually, one would withhold detailed descriptions of important features. Only to reveal them upon closer inspection. This will help keep your location descriptions succulent while still communicating the existence of those important features.

Encapsulation

Remember that the first description for a location is for the players to recognize what is there and get their bearings. A long winded description is asking the players to lose their attention. More so, a poorly crafted narration will easily break the established rhythm. A locations' descriptions only need to be detailed enough to:

- Identify itself.
- Position itself relative to other elements.
- Communicate a feeling.
- Invite further investigation.

Upon further investigation, unravel further details as necessary.

Example:

You arrived at the foot of a great mountain. Crossing the snowy woods, bearing the elements for weeks, you have arrived at the entrance to the forgotten keep.



Closer Inspection:

Obsidian walls, half buried in the snow, hold up a cracked entrance. Icicles lined the edges to darkness as if it awaits you, truly befitting its name as the Maw of Black Ice. A chilling blast of wind carries the sounds of an ancient battle. The shimmering of the dark iron portcullis glares menacingly under the sun. You can almost hear the wailing cry of a slain man by the sound of wind funnelling into the keep's entrance.

Tip: Designing with Natural Languages

The goal is to write naturally under a structure designed to easily attribute subjectively quantifiable values/scales to narrative descriptions.

With each of the listed qualitative categories below, it is up to the interpreter to attribute quantitative values to each category.

Under different contexts, each categories' representation may expand or contract. Under different time scales, space scales may be different. Under different space scales, time scales may be different.

See: [Temporal and Spatial Scales](#)



OSR Exploration Pacing:

May knowledge be your sword and caution be your shield.

Pacing is the pacing at which the party explores an arena. It can be seen as the exchange of attention vs speed while travelling. During a game, the pacing in how the game is run will change often by the demands of the players and the careful monitor of the GM.

Pacing dictates the true nature of the individual turns (which temporal and spatial scale to use?) of the game-play structure. It is up to the players to decide on which pacing they ought to take and the GM is to facilitate the pacing in a methodological manner at all times.

It is often assumed that the same pacing translates into the fictional world. Where under a presumed 'speed' and level of 'caution', the player characters are assumed to exercise a corresponding practice and behaviour. In return, the GM's liberty in their supply of information to the party changes with their pacing:

Exploration Speeds:

Battle/Action Speed:

The pacing of which the goal is to concentrate solely on the matter at hand. This is the default pacing for battles and high tension scenarios.

Under action speed, all measures should be taken as literally as allowed for the purpose of precision. Characters are in a heightened state of awareness, tension is high, usually with stakes at hand.

Quick! There's no time to explain!

The GM must provide as much information as possible that is not deliberately hidden as a plan of another fictional entity (traps, hidden foes etc.).



Arena Speed:

The pacing of which the goal is to avoid as much danger as possible and to identify as much risk as possible.

Under Arena Speed, it is always assumed that the characters are cautious and understand their predicament and susceptibility to potential danger. Characters are alert to new information, unusual indicators, unsuspecting events and unfamiliar senses (sound, sight, smell, sensation).

Slow to act upon, fast to react from.

Whilst within an arena or any other tension filled environment, it is always assumed that the party is cautious and aware of their surroundings. The GM must indicate:

- Unusual sensory (sound, sight, smell, sensation, taste in the air etc.)
- New information; triggering of traps/ambush and opportunity to react to said trap.

Overland/Travel/March Speed:

The pacing of which the goal is to reach a location as quickly as possible.

Under overland speed, it is agreeable that compared to arena pacing, characters are more susceptible to what could be easily avoidable if taken care of.

The sacrifice of haste, is caution.

The GM may overlook the need to inform the party of their environment unless prompted. Take into account that march pacing is a hurried state, and characters may fail to notice any information an average person may recognize. The GM might assume that all hidden/ambush involuntary events are able to be triggered without warning.

Down Speed:

The pacing of which the goal is to interact and progress the story.

Under down speed, the character may navigate to any location instantaneously within a set parameter. The times or routes taken are either neglected or are replaced with a simpler, more intuitive mechanical system.

Relax and enjoy roleplaying.

The GM will be more liberal in the type of information they supply, assuming the PC's most natural relaxed state unless informed otherwise. Allow them to notice what an average being would notice in their scenario.



For every pacing, there are two applications: **Overland** and **Arena** use. Where overland is the extrospective space and the arena are commonly the introspective space. Use the most appropriately efficient pacing for any given application. Any consequences are accounted for rationally, logically, narratively, irrespective of the primary mechanical system.

Anecdote: Stepping into Darkness

“If I can see or feel I am going off a ledge, I would stop.” Is a most ignorant argument under the context of exploration. First, the sense of curiosity and excitement occupies the explorer's thoughts. Secondly, the unease of fear and anxiety attacks the explorer's judgement. Lastly, humans are stupid.

I was going through the catacombs in Dark Souls. I could barely see the path ahead even with the lantern. I know I was walking whilst hugging against a cliff, but I was prepared to halt, turn or roll away from any ledge I came across. However, it only took an instance, a single step for me to slip into the abyss. It is true when they say: “I realised it, only when it's too late.” YOU DIED.

Anything can push an explorer over that eerie ledge, consensual or not. And we must account for these factors as uncertainty.”

In general, for the purposes of Trap Theory: Characters under **Battle Speed** and **March Speed** are the most susceptible to traps. Counterwise, characters under **Arena Speed** and **Down Speed** are the least susceptible to traps.

(Note it is also unfair to have traps act on the Down pacing, as it is usually a tensionless state)

Example: Different Pacing When Investigating an Arena Feature

When investigating the features of an arena room , the investigator might choose to investigate at Crawling Pace or Travelling Pace.

- **Crawling Pace** - Produces results in the **next turn** but is careful.
- **Travelling Pace** - Produces results **immediately** but is careless.

For example, scouting out a corner at crawling pace will render the scout well hidden even if they are holding a torch. It is assumed that the scout is aware of their own presence and makes conscious attempts to make themselves inconspicuous. They scour the landscape carefully, inches forward step by step and will notice abnormalities before taking the next step forward. Instead of a glimpse, the scout will confirm what they've seen thricefold with morbid suspicion...

Whereas scouting out a corner at crawling pace is simply the scout walking over and taking a glimpse. Fearless of any traps under or over, sounds of their footsteps and the light exfoliating from their torches.



Encountering Stimulating Events

See: [Stimulating Event](#)

Features/Props - Passive Stimulus

See: [Features of Arenas](#)



Encounters - Active Stimulus

The arena is alive, and its guts will devour you whole.

Encounters are active stimulating events.

The arena can be thought of as a giant organism, it has **Features** inside its guts that will repel intruders. Our party will meet those features by pure chance through simply existing in this environment and navigating through the arena.

Relationship Between Encounters and the Party

Encounters are ultimately a depletion mechanic. It introduces dynamicism in crawling and represents the agency of the arena. It is used to apply pressure to the party, deplete their resources, encourage them to keep moving and create tension. It is to the party's rational to be interested in:

- Avoiding encounters, minimising loss and adverse risk.
- Stop encounters from troubling them ever again.

More often or not, the party is uninterested in "what" the encounter is, but "what" threat and opportunity it presents to them that'll cause losses. If players are given the opportunity, they will take preventative measures to mitigate loss from an encounter. Be aware that this may not necessarily be a desirable behaviour.

If uptaking a certain procedure will grant an advantage to an upcoming event, the party will always do it.

Qualities of an Exemplar Encounter Entry:

- **Active Stimulus with its own Agency** - The stimulus has a clear agenda that it is eager to pursue and a disposition it holds true. Thus, it leads and drives narration, forcing response from parties.
- **Rhythmic but not Predictable** - Recognizable in the party's horizon of interest, but not debilitatingly concerning (So they do not see it as a chore).
- **Dynamic and Adaptive** - Able to be improvised under emergent developments.
- **Easy to Scope into Disposition** - The intended usage and purpose of the encounter by design is easy to reason.



Encounter Activity

Encounters are active by nature. Whereas the crawling experience is passive and indirect by nature.

Hence, instead of including passive, stationary features as an encounter table's entry, simply include those features in the arena.

However, traps are a particular exception to this case. While traps are physically stationary and reactive, the concept of traps can be reimagined/personified as an active being seeking to stimulate/cause trouble. As if the trap setup carries the will and intent of its trapper.

Encounter Agency

Consider the encounter entry, whatever it might be, as a personified feature of the arena. It has:

- Desires.
- Motivation.
- Disposition.

Behind the activity of the encounters, it enthusiastically strives for the fulfilment of the above.



Travelling in Arenas (Raiding)

Fictional beings will have to move about. When a scene is continuous, we will have to track the logical steps in how a character moves down a pathway and becomes positioned at a particular standing. In relation to an arena, a character will:

- **Journey** - Progressive (self & material) change.
- **Navigate** - Progressive (self & material) direction alignment.
- **Explore** - Progressive (self & material) discovery.

A pathway.

Recall: *A pathway is a contained possibility in tellings that will contribute to the narration. A pathway is followed and/or pursued by a character.*

Arena Crawl Levels:

Recall: [Temporal and Spatial Scales](#) and [Types of Arenas](#).

The space characters are travelling in are in of itself a type of arena. Arena comes in many scales, and an arena can exist within an arena. Each cascading arena is an extrospective location that consists of introspective, constitutional locations. Hence, traversing at the overview/overland scale follows the same principles of crawling an arena.

The use of constituting arenas in TTRPG can be visualised as if it is layered in **Levels of Perceptions**. When arenas are perceived at different scales they carry different connotations. Where each perception level above is a composite of the levels below, each level below is a constitutional part of the layer above. A given level of arena acts identically to any arena. It can be explored, navigated and travelled through.

Often the rhythm of play and the rules applied changes as the level of perception changes.

I.e. Travelling rules overland are typically different to travelling rules in dungeons or during a battle.

Cooking at a campfire may have different connotations to cooking at a tavern, or cooking at the private kitchen of the Highlord's castle.

For example, the arena levels are but not limited to:



Other levels above/in macro scale...

Overview Level - The arena is a site of readying. Interested in all possible activities.

Typically, this level acts as the stage for the purpose of navigating to other constitutional arenas.

Example Locations:

Exploring geographical maps that contain cultural locations (civilisations, ruins, castles, docks and vehicles etc.) and natural locations (fields, hills, forests, mountains and sea etc.).

Example Activities:

- *Journeying, travelling, navigating and exploring.*
- *Planning, strategizing and scouting.*

Site view Level - The arena is a site of dungeoneering. Interested in an archetype of activities.

Typically, this is the level that acts as the stage for **Plot Time** tellings and activity.

Example Locations:

Castle/Dungeon, a city, a field, a ship.

Example Activities:

- *Carousing.*
- *Vocational pursuits.*
- *Browsing, surfing and shopping.*

Tunnel view Level - The arena is a site of tension. Interested in an acute activity.

Typically this is the level that acts as the stage for **Action Time** tellings. A stimulus will typically force a player into this level, though players can initiate the entering of an arena of this level. This is where the majority of role-play and/or game-play are performed.

Example Locations:

Rooms, a stadium, a shop, patch of land, ship deck.

Example Activities:

- *Battling, combat, conflict and tussling physical games.*
- *Bargaining, debating and playing mind games.*
- *High tension, high stake stimulus.*

Other levels below/in micro scale...



Example Connotations of Levels

Travelling at Overview Level

- Travelling between arenas meant to traverse a dangerous and hostile environment that resists you from getting to that arena.
- Encounters are events one encounters on travels. When such events occur, the scene may shift introspectively.
 - **Example:** *Meeting a pack of wolves while travelling through a forest (territory) will collapse the scene down to the forest, with the stimuli (wolves) engaged.*
- **Temporal Scale** switches to months, weeks, days.
- **Spatial Scale** switches to Villages, Towns, Cities... The next town over etc.
- The **POI** of monsters are their territories/regions of activity.

Travelling at Site View Level

- Travelling within an arena can carry many connotations. In most, it is a location where one may conduct some activities.
- Encounters are events one encounters when the location needs to be systematically swept. When such events occur, the scene may shift introspectively.
 - **Example:** *Is it a dangerous den of bandits, is it a peaceful forest walk or is it the town you wished to shop in? If the bandits are a jolly crew, sure. Otherwise It'll be a slaughter in their hideout. Entering that dark forest may have you skulk from tree to tree, river to river. Entering a wing of the shady shop may shrink down to a room by room crawl.*
- **Temporal Scale** switches to days, hours, minutes.
- **Spatial Scale** switches to rooms, corridors, gates... Landmarks.
- The **POI** of monsters are their outgoings/regions of appearance.

Travelling at Tunnel View Level

- Travelling in a particular investigative site is simply moving attention from features to features.
- Encounters are interactions with those features. In doing so, potential events may be triggered.
 - **Example:** *At a forest clearing, there seemed to be an injured pup. Picking it up may invite unwanted attention...*
- **Temporal Scale** switches to minutes, seconds, milliseconds.
- **Spatial Scale** switches to the entrance of the room, cardinal walls, centre of the room...
- The **POI** of monsters is their reach/region of activity.



Arenas

What are Arenas?

Here lies dragons.

Arenas are the functional image of a dungeon.

Historical Connotations of “Dungeon”

The colloquial term ‘dungeon’ carries the connotation of an underground environment enveloped in darkness. The term suggests secludedness, mystery and the unknown. In a TTRPG, it is the environment where players delve in, to seek the thrill of excitement.

The term was defined in honour of a ”chainmail” game where Gary Gygax, Dave Anderson and their party had to navigate through a tunnel under a fortress. Later, the game “Dungeons and Dragons” became a game that appeals to the facilitation of the Lotr experience thanks to the shared passion among their hobby group. Inspired by the vast Dwarven mines the fellowships find themselves in, the term dungeon was referred to these sites of adventure where stimulating events occur.

Typically a dungeon is a location rich in history, lore, yet was abandoned, an ancient giant who is reminiscent of its prime memories and it’s skeleton echoes the consequences of the past.

Typically reminiscent of an abyss, otherwise known as an “Eternal City”, a locational symbol of its time. The scenes of the ancient times are preserved in this space.

Too late to explore the Earth, too early to explore the universe, but just in time to relive the ancients.

The story of a game takes place in this melancholia after-thought, now available for the players to discover and build their own story upon the shoulders of the giant.

From dungeons arises the philosophy of “dungeoneering” and the practice of “dungeon crawling”: the act of exploring a dungeon.

Over time, dungeons evolved from underground bases to practically any location that facilitated story and offered game-play opportunities. For the better purpose of writing an abstract guide that is free from connotations, I have redefined it as the term:

“Arena”.

An arena is a space deliberately designed for a game to be held in.



A football field is an arena for the game “football”, a virtual map is an arena for a video game. The stereotypical conglomerate of arenas, the colosseum, is an arena for the game “gladiator battles” and so on.

For a TTRPG, an arena is a location that is a self-contained enclosure of features which are:

- Activities to do (game-play),
- Stimulating events ongoing and/or waiting to be sprang,
- Plots to follow,
- Space to navigate,
- Stories to listen to,
- And a canvas for the players to build their PC’s narrative from (role-play).

An arena is always under tension, on the verge of change, presents stakes at all times in every location, and facilitates risky activities. Resolutions with stakes are typically tested within an arena.

However, an arena is not necessarily a bound location. The spaces are only arbitrarily bounded and enclosed into these ‘packages’ we call locations. Boundaries cannot be definitively drawn, but fencing spaces into locations makes it easier to manage the gameplay structure as you can:

- Make reference to locations by name.
- Align the common canon to one understanding of space.
- Have regulated, limited creative insights into the space.
- Document and prepare materials surrounding that space.



Types of Arenas:

Arenas exist in the spatial outlook of a piece of fiction. Often or not, a character's position is tracked and must be described to be at the location of an arena. Their position in the arena is often the primary limiting factor over whether a character may interact with an arena and have influence in the narrative surrounding it. Thus, arenas can be categorised by their accessibility and the degree of freedom (pathways) they offer to fictitious beings.

Recall: *A pathway is a contained possibility in tellings that will contribute to the narration. A pathway is followed and/or pursued by a character.*

Open Arena

This is the typical story location where it is an open environment that is free to enter and exit. There is no limiting factor or boundaries surrounding this type of arena. The arena itself is purposefully designed to have no determined pathways in navigating this location and its narrative.

An open arena is like water; it shapes around you. You can find some things you couldn't find elsewhere and you can bring something here that they don't have. The open arena is not necessarily inviting, nor is it rejective. Only existing and hospitable.

It is the ground you stood on.

Generally, open arenas are low tension locations. Often features in an open arena are impartial and responsive only when stimulated.

Example:

- *Civilization.*
- *Overview map.*
- *Open Forest such as woodlands.*



Closed Arena

This is the “dungeons”, where the arena has conditional entrances and exits. It is restricted to enter and restricted to exit. The pathways in navigating this location and its narratives are intentionally designed for a purpose and to create an effect.

A closed arena is like a pile of hot tar, you have to think twice to get in and think thrice to get out. Once you're in, you're in. The closed arena has a tendency of preventing you from leaving and/or drawing you in. Like a vortex of natural disturbances, it's keen to catch and devour you whole.

It is a hole in the ground. An abyss. When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back.

Generally, closed arenas are high tension environments. Often features in a closed arena are compulsive and actively stimulate the narrative.

Examples:

- *Dungeons.*
- *Extreme weather/climate.*
- *Closed forest such as jungles.*

Semi-Closed Arena

The degree of freedom and accessibility of an arena lies on a fluctuating spectrum. At one temporal point, an arena may be open, then in another it may become closed. Before stimulus, the status quo of an arena defined it to be open. After experiencing a stimulus, the disruption of the status quo caused the open arena to collapse into a close one.

A Semi-closed Arena is like a barrel of nitroglycerin in solvent solution. Sure it's stable for now, but being at the wrong time at the wrong place will quickly turn it into powered-explosive as it crystallises out of the solution. It is a location of high tensioned terror.

It is ground with a hole inches underneath it. Tempting you to crawl and cower. Or the other way around, it's an inch of horizontally-shafted ice that can support an elephant.

Examples:

- *A peaceful town may be free of tension, but under the fires of war, a peaceful town may quickly descend into anarchy. A chaotic town, a desolated city makes excellent closed arenas.*
- *A dungeon may be dangerous and uninviting, but after it's cleared of all threats and hazards, it is free real estate! Just don't mind that it's haunted or something.*



Features of Arenas

The features of an arena are distinctive assets that can be used to facilitate an experience by providing the opportunity of triggering an stimulating event. The features of an arena are the elements that the party will interact with, to role-play from and to find game-play in. An arena must include features like a house must have walls and pillars.

Features are but not limited to:

- *The theme, the moral message behind the arena.*
- *The history and lore of the arena. How and why it exists.*
- *The layout, the individual rooms of an arena. Where and why things exist there.*
- *The residents, visitors and the pass by NPCs. What is their personality, worries and desires? What made them that way?*

A river of crocodiles, or a “monster” who wants you dead? The latter resolves to only conflict, while the previous to a gateway of opportunities.

See: [Populating the Area](#) for a more comprehensive discussion of potential features.

Presenting The Features to the Players

Attentive players will quickly seek the details of a feature, and the potentiality of how to exploit it for their own benefit.

If the players wish to train an army of leopards, the GM should show them where to find boots.

See: [Information Horizon](#) for a more detailed discussion on how to present information.



Appendices (Part 2): Dumpling's Guide to Arena Design

The compilation guide to dungeoneering, dungeon room, dungeon crawl and encounter design.

Aim: To design space that is able to facilitate an emergent narrative to tell a story of a particular experience.

Appendix 2.A: Populating the Arena

“Combat is already a failure state. [...] Risk-averse players should also be combat-adverse.”

- Arnold K, *Goblin Punch*

Combat should be the least interesting offer of stimuli one should find in an Arena. Even just walking from room to room should be more interesting (mapmaking, navigating, exploring)

The perfect starter TTRPG game is a limited sandbox, a microworld on the verge of tipping the status quo.

Arena Check-List

Something to Take

Gives reason to visit a location. The prime mover of character development and advancement.

I.e. Treasure (Monetary, Spiritual, Emotional), Knowledge, Connections (Friendship, Debts, Rivalry), Services, Trade Goods, Territorial Goods.

Something to Destroy

Features which exist in an arena that can be removed. Characters that visit certainly have the choice to wipe the location or its features off the map.

Something to Stop For

Locations are designed to be passable. Locations should never be a dead end that is impassable. As that will grind the story to a halt.

But locations should feel impassable. Whether it is an obstacle that stops the story from advancing, a side trip that is more interesting, a location must have resistances. Something that stops characters from simply passing by.



Something Worth Stopping For

On the other hand, what stops you does not necessarily oppose you. Whatever is worthy of a stop must also be attractive enough for adventurers to briefly place their agenda on the backburner. An alluring sight will muse a poet to a halt, a beautiful sight will lure an artist by their tail. A cask of thousand year old wine is enough to poison an otherwise good man and gold glorie is enough to corrupt a comrade.

Something From the Outside

Whilst an arena is meant to be secluded, making connections to the extraterritorial is a wonderful technique to build the world of the entire game. Drawing connections with existing elements with your story makes it more concise. Sometimes, effectively reusing those elements, saving you precious effort.

Something Like You

Surely you are not the only people who come to interact with this arena. Are there others?

Are there signs of activity, not from the residents of the arena, but from intruders, interlopers just like you? Will they have the same interest and agenda as you? Will they be with you, or against you?

Something to Talk To

Cheap, easy way to add depth and roleplaying opportunities. A NPC, who are they? Why are they here? How did they get here? What are they after?

Tip: Give each NPC a vague agenda, and/or general motivation and/or disposition, not an exact function. Have an idea behind why that disposition came to be.

“Some say, many believe, but few reckon.”

Something to Listen To

Things to observe, things to see, thing to take in and take away:

- Advice, warnings and information for upcoming and ongoing events.
- Exposition and lore.
- Evidence of a narrative to be constructed.

Something to Experiment With

The weird, the unknown that follows a consistent rule. This weird existence opens opportunities to be exploited, whether it is for its intended use, or ill intended use.

Something that is a Unbiased Force of Nature

A wildcard factor that any party can exploit, yet cannot wield completely. A law or a will of the world.

Something Probably not going to be Found

The opportunity for unprecedented joy of discovery. Do not expect it to be found, but if lead up to it, it will become an unexpected event that will open to certain opportunities.



Something to Come Back for

The fictional world is a big place, and an arena is intimately connected with its surroundings. Certain areas will become soft-locked when a required key to access it is unavailable. This lock-key combination may be a physical item, experience or a piece of knowledge. Perhaps this key is found elsewhere in the world. Whatever it is, it becomes a lingering thought that will draw the players back when they have acquired the keys. This enlarges the world view and recycles content.

Something that is Happening Right now (Ongoing Stimuli)

The fiction is in progression in the background regardless of the concern of the party. Some events had, is and always will be challenging the arena's status quo. Whether it be an external or an internal event, there is always the opportunity that the party may stumble upon a scene in session.

Something that is Waiting to Happen (Potential Stimuli)

Plots and schemes is a constant mangle of yarn. The butterfly's wings are merely a conduit in a string of events. While we cannot guess what and why something unanticipated is going to occur, we may instead assume that all events are on the verge of revealing themselves. An arena is often riddled with these hidden events, but since we cannot possibly account for their relationships, cause and effect, a retrospective response post-mortem of the stimuli is sufficient to rationalise the narrative.

Linearity, Choices and Agency

A balance is needed in linearity to achieve the desired result. Too linear and every aspect seems to have been decided. Too open and there is redundancy or oversimplification of aspects. A good balance allows for player agency without sacrificing control and limitations from the GM.



Appendix 2.B: Arena Design Principles

Micro-World Theory

An arena can be seen as a micro-world. It is a purposefully designed space that scopes from an extrospective world. An arena can be designed in isolation, its contents self-contained. Yet it can also become a boiling pot of drama where elements throughout the world's settings seemingly concentrate.

An arena has an ecosystem that functions in isolation. When viewed in perspectives, arenas are shaped by its features:

- **History** - a reason for the arena's being, becoming and eventuality.
- **Environments** - the external and internal parameters that allowed the arena to exist.
- **Residents & Visitors** - have desires and relationships. In return, they shape the arena.
- **Events** - stimulus that will change and drive the narrative of those who are caught up in it. The residents and visitors.

What is important is that microworld are once secluded, isolated from the outside world. The interior is unknown, yet coherently functional. It is only now that it is exposed and ready to be discovered in its entirety.

Internal Knowledge

Most information required to navigate an arena should be contained within the arena. External knowledge can be applicable, but an arena must not be dependent on external knowledge. An arena is a test, but it tests deductive reasoning through internal evidence (information).



Maintain Tension through Pressure

An arena is a location that is rich in stimulus, hence it is always under tension and the characters have stakes on the line. Only the decisions made under pressure when tension is high with stakes on the line will it reveal the purest image of a character.

To create tension, always apply pressure:

- Close to the path to retreat and/or herd the party forward in some incentive.
- Disallowing revisits to parts of the area (that are considered free of stimulus and safe) until after clearing the arena.

A cleared arena or a part of an arena (rooms) is rid of tension. There will be no active danger seeking out the player nor protecting the arena. When this occurs, the process of action time game-play shifts into plot time role-play. The extraordinary excitement will plummet as mundanity returns. Only with the presence of tension and stakes on the line will the agency of PCs be meaningful.

However: *Music is the space between the notes.*

It is also important to have fine control over the stockholding of tension and release of tension as per general writing advice.

Replayability and Recycling

An arena needs not to be explored entirely in one passing.

Recycle elements. Elements that players missed can be recycled, with more specific indication of their importance and helpfulness.

However, be aware that recycling does not usurp the party of their agency. If they chose the safe pathway from the dangerous pathway, do not reskin the dangerous path and force them upon the party.

Temporal and Spatial Scales

Gameplay operates in units of turns. Turns are abstract units of time used as a tool to track positional progress in an arena and/or narrative space over time. The units used to make references are the Temporal and Spatial scales.

I.e. The metric system. The Imperial system.

Tip: Announce so, when time and/or space scale changes and indicate so clearly.



Example: Relative Temporal and Spatial Scaling

For relative scaling, each cycle of the acting order phases the temporal scale by one unit instead of the actual value the unit represents.

Relative Space Turns: Abouts

Relative Space Scale:

Close

Nearby

Distant

Far far away

Ballpark Space Scale: [POI](#)

At

Around

Relative Space Turns: Moments

Ballpark Time Scales:

Instant (seconds)

Moment (minutes)

While (hours)

Long long time (days, weeks, months)

The defining characteristic of Relative Scaling is that the spatial and temporal scale of turns changes as the subject matter changes.

A moment in battle may be a few ‘actual’ seconds, a moment at dungeon speed may be an ‘actual’ minute and a moment at travel speed may be an ‘actual’ hour. All “moments”, under different temporal scales.

An item in a room may be closely within ‘arm’s reach’, a store in a city might be close about a corner away and a mountain is only about comparably closer than the next mountain over. All “close”, under different spatial scales.

About here... At this moment...

It is interesting to know that calendar days, weeks and months, including measurable metric time units are all concepts of time. Metres, feet and any measurable distances are all concepts of space. Yet mere instants, moments, a while and a long long time ago are all perspectives on time. And abouts, close, nearby, and distant are all perspectives on space.

However, as long as the formal system’s mechanical rules were designed to interact with the qualitative scales, the quantitative details will stand.



Example:

Luke: *"I enter the next room, what do I see?"*

GM: *"You enter a cylindrical room nay tall and nay wide. The floor rises high above the ground below, you are practically standing on a platform on top of a towner. Two entrances to this room run on a walkway to the platform in the centre of the room. It is cold and blue, where you can sparsely see electricity jumping in the air. Close to you are the walkways, far away at its centre is the pillar of the tower that holds the platform you stand on and in the distance across the room he stands... Darth Butthole."*

<< [Detailed dimensions][Condition of the arena][Gateway][Features] >>

Darth: *"It's Darth Vader."*

GM: *"I stand corrected."*

Luke: *"He stands corrected."*

Time Scale: Moments

Who knows what your fantasy calendar and planetary cycles are like? But they have to be consistent.

These are abstract values of time:

- **Instants** - Action time that requires precision control, immediate cause and effect and ordered resolution mechanics.
- **Moments** - Arena time used to explore or traverse an arena or other locations under tension. Commonly for a set number (3~10) of minutes, a random encounter occurs.
- **While** - Daily times used to explore social environments, used to practise downtime vocations. Different GMs and/or formal systems may split one day into different categorical sets of hours (morning, twilight, dusk, evening, midnight etc.).
- **Long long Time** - Travel times used to explore the world map as to travel from arenas to arenas.

Spatial Scale: Point of Interest (POI)

A **Point of Interest (POI)**, attention and/or focus is an area of attentiveness and activity that is worthy of concern. Such concerns are to observe, interact, (re)construct or change.

Points where interesting things happen, to whom we concern.

For more, see booklet: [Spatial Scale: Point of Interest \(POI\)](#)



Appendix 2.C: Turn Resolution Checklist

1. Open Intermission/Inter-scene
 - a. Update **Party Sheet/Conditions**
 - i. Check Items picked up from Last Scene
 - ii. Check Marching order
 - iii. Check Pacings
 - b. Check **Lighting Conditions**
 - i. Deplete Light Sources
 - c. Check Map
 - i. Has the mapkeeper updated the map?
 - ii. Is everyone in agreement with the map?
 - d. Determine next steps:
 - i. Which scene does the party wish to open? Which room to progress next?
 - ii. Call for a break if necessary.
 - iii. Review the relevant part of your scenario for the desired scene.
2. Close Intermission/Inter-scene
3. Open scene (determined in 1.d.).
 - a. **Master Phase**
 - i. Describe flavour and fluff.
 - ii. Describe all key locations.
 1. Remind yourself of traps and hidden stimuli.
 2. Respond immediately if conditioned (upon entry).
 - b. **Player Phase**
 - i. In a systematic order, ask for the player's approaches.
 - ii. In a systematic order, resolve each approach.
 - iii. Repeat until you desire to leave the current room/scene.
4. Close the scene. Return to 1.
5. Repeat until Dungeon is cleared.



Appendix 2.D: Trap Theory

Taken from In Development Document: Trap Theory

What is a Trap in an Arena?

- Traps are challenges that require foresight.
- Traps are not a puzzle.
- Traps evoke perplexing FEAR.
- Traps and players are in a predictor, prey relationship.
- Traps are always under tension and constrained by time.

A good trap places actors in a tense, stake filled situation where they have to make choices and ultimatums. A good trap gives an opportunity to advertise the ill effect. A good trap is not cheap.

The mere “presence” of the characters invoke the trap to challenge them.

Anatomy of Traps in Abstract Space

- **Bait/Lure** - The reason for characters to leave their comfort zone.
- **Trigger** - The condition that arms the stakes and raises tension.
- **Key** - The elements which allude to the trigger or the danger of the trap.
- **Switch** - The condition that disarms the tension (i.e. for the trap setter).
- **Danger** - Things that threaten the actors. Undesirable to be influenced by.

The Key

“They can’t know the plan if you don’t have a plan.”

Never design for solutions. Trust in **Invent Inference**. But keys will help guide players to a healthy, logical inference.

- Something that can give a hint, a hands up over the trap.
- Something to tinker, fiddle, play around with that interacts with the trap somehow.
- Something that contributes and helps reaching the switch.
- Something that alleviates the danger, reduces the stakes or tension.



Appendix 2.E: Information Horizon

Taken from In Development Document: Information Horizon

There are only two types of actions in games: Tactical action and coping action.

Information is the basis of strategic decisions. The more information, the more likely that a prediction is accurate. However, this introduces more decisions to make. This will easily lead players into choice paralysis, or choice hyperactivity respectively. Both optimisation behaviours from the players that tend to replace fun with frustration. All in the process, using up valuable session times.

Then again, sometimes for the sake of immersion, inference and desires, strategic thinking is best discarded. If the choice to acquire a strategically advantageous position would bring down the thematic/in narrative value, which would you choose if you are a player in that position? What is valued in your game? Strategic victory, or cohesive story telling? Will you sacrifice your disbelief for a fleeting victory?

Information horizon is the prospects of information the players can perceive, usually bottlenecked by the GM. This flow and feed of information must be controlled. Such that the process of digesting information is satisfactory to be fun, yet unsatisfactory to spark the desire for more. The rate of flow of information must allow players to observe and comprehend the information horizon to avoid the complications of the above mentioned predicaments of strategic thinking.

Appendix 2.F: Crux(es)

A crux is an influential point of singularity. Often a turning-point, a crux is usually a event that significantly marks the beginning, twist or the end of a significant aspect of the narrative. When interaction from PCs may influence the dynamicism of fiction through a single event, it worthy to have a scenario constructed around it.

- TBD (12/10/22)